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Until recent years ecocriticism has focused almost exclusively on nature-centered texts, heralding Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* as its urtext. As scholars are broadening the field’s canonical and theoretical range, they are now recognizing Gothicism’s long-held concerns about ecology, and they have termed this new area of critical inquiry *the ecogothic*. Framing the ecogothic as a critical lens rather than a literary mode, this dissertation broadens the ecocritical range by considering how writers use Gothicism to contest environmentally harmful ideologies. It expands this subfield by examining what I define as principal characteristics of the Gothicization of nature—deformity, isolation, transgression, and sterility—and explores how this representation enables texts to challenge widely held improvement discourses. Specifically, it argues that from the late-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, Gothic texts deploy these characteristics to combat the idea of improvement, illustrating the devastating ecological and societal effects of its reliance on the nature-culture binary.

This transnational dissertation considers four novels that represent improvement as catalyzing ruin. *Wieland* illuminates the culturally dysfunctional entanglement of women and nature and employs that link to criticize improved spaces as sites of early American patriarchal violence. *Frankenstein* demonstrates improvement’s negative consequences, and, deploying the nonbinary Creature, the novel challenges the improvement norm’s reliance on the nature-culture dichotomy. *Jane Eyre* depicts Jane as

an object of improvement and demonstrates how such an emphasis continually fails her, meanwhile suggesting the ruinous effects of rejecting improvement outright. And *The House of the Seven Gables* emphasizes (female) Nature as culture's improver to criticize the divisive binaries that uphold the idea of improvement. "Much improved of late" contributes to ecocriticism by considering how Gothicism enables writers to question and combat exploitive human engagements with the natural environment.

“MUCH IMPROVED OF LATE”: ECOGOTHIC READINGS OF IMPROVEMENT IN AMERICAN AND BRITISH NOVELS, 1798-1852

by

Bryan McMillan

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Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

To Antoinette and Rosie McMillan

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This dissertation written by Bryan McMillan has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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_____
Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____
Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"No: you are very well; and much improved of late" (*Jane* 238). So insists Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, following Jane's reflection about her own ostensible monstrosity, which seemingly prevents Mr. Rochester from "[having] a sincere affection for [her]" (*Jane* 238). As Mrs. Fairfax employs improvement discourse to contest Jane's self-assessment, this moment emblemizes the intersection of Gothicism and improvement, which this project investigates. Although ecocriticism began by focusing almost exclusively on nature-centered texts, heralding Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as its urtext, the field has recently started broadening its scope. Scholars are now recognizing Gothicism's long-held concerns about ecology, and they have termed this new field of critical inquiry *the ecogothic*. My project expands this subfield by examining what I consider principal characteristics of the Gothicization of nature—namely, deformity, isolation, transgression, and sterility—and explores how this representation enables texts to challenge pervading improvement discourses. Specifically, I argue that from the late-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, Gothic texts deploy these characteristics to combat the idea of improvement, illustrating the devastating ecological and societal effects of its reliance on the nature-culture binary.

Resisting Orthodoxies, Redefining the Ecological

Cheryll Glotfelty, one of ecocriticism's founding members, defines the field as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocriticism, as she puts it, has sought to expand our conceptions of what constitutes the "world," which she faults "most literary theory" for limiting to "society—the social sphere" (xix). She notes that this narrow view creates many of the ecological problems we currently face. Desiring to increase awareness of a much larger domain, ecocriticism redefines "'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix). As a result, ecocritics have privileged literature that explicitly either takes nature as its main topic or that relies on "natural" settings.[1]

Critics like Scott Sanders have even faulted late twentieth-century literature for insufficiently featuring natural environments. Sanders complains that "what is missing from much recent fiction … is any sense of nature, any acknowledgement of a nonhuman context" (183), something he cherishes about late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. He further contends that American authors have a distinct advantage over their British counterparts because, as he puts it, British representations of nature—such that we find in works by Thomas Hardy, William Wordsworth, and D.H. Lawrence—are merely

[1] Ecocriticism's major establishing collection is *The Ecocriticism Reader*, published in 1996 and edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harrold Fromm. It contains often-referenced essays, including a re-publication of Lynn White, Jr.'s 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," wherein he identifies the Christian dominion model (a view that humans have a divine mandate to rule the natural world) as the central source of Western anthropocentrism and environmental destruction. The collection also celebrates the Frederick Turner's "Cultivating the American Garden," where he posits the idea that humans are nature-naturing; Niel Evernden's "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy," which demonstrates why the sciences (and indeed, environmentalism) needs the humanities; and Annette Kolodny's "Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction," which foregrounds the problem with the America's long history of gendering its land female. For more recent scholarship, see also *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, published in 2014.

"pockets of wildness surrounded by a domesticated landscape" (183). However, America writers, who still have access to "untrammeled" nature, "have not had to hunt for wildness" (Sanders 183). Sanders makes extraordinary logical leaps, celebrating American literature's supposed close connection to "nature." Perhaps inadvertently, his argument also supports the problematic human-nature, subject-object bifurcation that combats the ecocentrism he promotes as an alternative to anthropocentrism.

While Sanders desires contemporary writers to more explicitly feature the natural environment, as well as the canonical privileging of earlier nature-centered American texts, others, like Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, have argued strongly that ecocritics should extend their focus beyond nature writing and wilderness literature, including, for instance, the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, or Edward Abbey.[2] In their groundbreaking book *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*,[3] Armbruster and Wallace assert that despite ecocriticism's increasing momentum within the academy, if the field hopes to prosper, it must also begin considering texts "set in environments where the influence of nature is less than obvious, texts from the point of view of diverse populations with alternative perspectives on nature and human relationships to it, and postmodern texts that might also seem 'post-nature'" (5). They have correctly observed that seemingly environmentally disengaged works often have much to say about human-nature relationships. For example, they illustrate how Henry James's writing, which often lacks

[2] Most notably, Emerson's essay "Nature," Thoreau's *Walden*, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, and Muir's "My First Summer in the Sierras."
[3] Published in 2001.

lush natural descriptions, exemplifies the notion that "the natural environment is always a shaping force of individual and group psychology and identity—and that this force can only be ignored or suppressed at a price" (7). Indeed, they adeptly demonstrate the connections between "the lack of grounding in physical and cultural place and the misunderstanding, objectification, and alienation" of James's female protagonists in "Daisy Miller" and *The Portrait of a Lady* (8). Ecocriticism does not necessarily need more nature writing; rather, if our field wishes to remain relevant, or, better yet, expand its relevancy, it must recognize that myriad modes and genres, and diverse representations of the physical space have ecological import.

Nearly a decade after Armbruster and Wallace's charge to expand our literary range, Astrid Bracke echoed them, faulting ecocritics for continually favoring "nature-oriented works" (765). In practice, ecocriticism's continuing narrowness has limited what scholars can accomplish. Bracke challenges us to begin examining works that are not explicitly environmental or nature-oriented, especially considering the urgency of our environmental crisis. Expanding our scope, she urges, will help us more adequately demonstrate our field's relevance to outsiders, open the ecocritical canon to more accurately reflect the ambiguity of contemporary environmental circumstances, and move beyond "traditional, heavily thematic concerns and take into account the entire breadth of cultural expression" (766-767).

Heeding this call, my project broadens the ecocritical range by considering how writers deploy Gothicism to contest environmentally harmful ideologies. In this study I will be expanding the critical work that opened up with Adam Smith and William Hughes

in 2013.[4] Although the most recent entry into this small body of work regards proposes a literary mode, I regard ecogothic as a critical frame only because distinguishing the *ecogothic* as a mode at the expense of the *Gothic* assumes that Gothicism in itself has little interest in the natural environment. Perhaps inadvertently, this formulation perpetuates the restrictive range of textual possibilities that warrant ecocritical consideration, privileging Gothic narratives that feature the natural world and ignoring texts that seemingly do not. For this reason, my project defines the *ecogothic* strictly as a theoretical subset of ecocriticism, not as a delineable literary mode. As such, I contend that what Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils[5] recognize as a distinct mode should be reframed as an emerging critical awareness of the Gothic's longstanding participation in what we would now call ecological matters, or as David Del Principe puts it,

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[4] Adam Smith and William Hughes's *Ecogothic* is the first book-length work to lay the groundwork for the emerging ecogothic subfield. It contains ecogothic readings of eighteenth through twenty-first-century American and Canadian works, and considers wilderness representations, monstrosity, environmental apocalypse, and ecofeminism. Smith and Hughes's text is the first to offer a definition of the ecogothic, understanding it as an interpretive lens that concentrates on "[exploring] the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism" (1). The book's broad scope illustrates how we can apply ecocritical analysis to many Gothic narrative forms. Its unique range has sparked scholarly interest for more extended and focused inquiry.

[5] In November 2017, Routledge released a large-scale study entitled, *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils. The third and most recent ecogothic exploration, it is the first extended work to characterize previous definitions of the ecogothic as "[broad]" in scope (3), and their prolonged task of narrowing this definition implies that previous definitions lack necessary specificity. While they agree with the idea that the ecogothic "typically presupposes" an ecocritical lens (1), they also see it as "a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic" (1), which they subsequently describe as clearly distinguishable from "the conventional Gothic" (7). The book explores various authors and genres from across the nineteenth century, including Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short prose, Charles Brockden Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe's novels, and Mary Prince's as-told-to slave narrative. Furthermore, examining such central ideas as ecophobia, control, and the nonhuman, this work "challenges the view that America's environmental imagination chiefly originated from and came to be defined by the pastoral, anthropocentric, and ultimately innocuous natural world found in the writings of the Transcendentalists" (Keetley and Sivils 48).

"engagement with environment and species-related issues" (1).[6] This reframing helps scholars not only reconsider Gothic texts with explicit environmentalisms—like *Frankenstein*—but also to reimagine works with merely implied (or seemingly absent) environmental interests—like *Wieland*—as actually having much to say about human interactions with the natural world. Secondarily, this project incorporates the term "ecogothic," again not to demark a modal subset, but rather to accentuate how Gothicism is already environmentally engaged. Descriptors such as "ecogothic moments" or "ecogothic texts" simply indicate emerging critical awareness of gothic entanglements with the natural world (even when these entanglements materialize in the most unlikely places) rather than. It implores scholars to refine how we conceptualize Gothicism, as well as what constitutes the ecological.

This project expands how scholars understand nineteenth-century Gothic novelists, specifically underscoring how they began developing an environmental tradition with commonalities and variances. By focusing on the idea of "improvement" (of nature or individuals), this project reframes common interconnected Gothic tropes—including isolation, sterility, delusion, deformity, and transgression—as environmentally engaged. A central ideology during the latter half of the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, *improvement* had a wide scope and included commerce, manufacture,

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[6] Following Smith and Hughes groundbreaking work, *Gothic Studies* released a special issue (vol. 16, no. 1, published in 2014), foregrounding the ecogothic. David Del Principe articulates the issue's goal as an attempt "to bring together Gothic works—British, Irish, and Italian—that are typically not approached from a transnational perspective, and to consider their engagement with environment and species-related issues through the theoretical lens of an emerging field of critical inquiry – the EcoGothic" (1). Del Principe's language here underscores his agreement with Smith and Hughes's that we understand the ecogothic as an ecocritical subset. This *Gothic Studies* issue considers such writers as Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Tommaso Landolfi, alongside central ideas like the wanderer trope, rurality, and alienated animality.

transport, agriculture, towns, country houses, the arts, and the condition of the poor (Girouard 86). The term was applied to everything from landscape design to what Sarah Tarlow calls "the moral sense of self-cultivation" (12), two aspects that my environmental project treats as necessarily entangled.[7] As such, this project often considers how improvement of natural environments simultaneously reinforces nature-culture and gender hierarchies.[8]

While improvement should bring about aesthetic harmony and, metaphorically, personal advantage, Gothic narratives frequently represent it as catalyzing ruin. For instance, in *Wieland* renovations of the sterile temple symbolize the Wieland family's mistaken belief that they are beyond the reaches of their family curse, leaving them unprepared for the unmitigated chaos and violence they later experience. In *Frankenstein* Victor attempts to improve nature by bypassing "natural" reproduction, resulting in a patchwork creation who, although made for beauty, showcases the horridness human exploitations of the natural world provoke. Deformity frequently characterizes human figures who represent Nature as transgressing cultural strictures—such as the wild, animalistic ("unimproved") Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*—and also the objects of Nature's transgressions—like the dilapidated Pyncheon house, which Nature "adopted," in *The House of the Seven Gables*.

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[7] For more on the idea of improvement, see also Asa Briggs, Andrew McRae, and Joan Thirsk.
[8] See Annette Kolodny's canonical book *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, which details how colonial Americans constructed the American landscape as female, virginal, and conquerable.

Beginning with America's first Gothic novel, Chapter One reframes Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; or the Transformation* as an example of early American environmentalism. The novel tells the tragic tale of a family murder on a seemingly isolated, picturesque Pennsylvania estate: Mettingen. The Wieland family's lone survivor, Clara Wieland, relates the entire narrative. Ecocritics have not yet considered *Wieland* as an environmental text, but this omission could stem from the implicitness of Brown's argument. However, perceiving the Mettingen estate as a late-eighteenth century woman's re-creation and focusing on the various manifestations and consequences of improvement (including isolation and deformity) brings the novel's environmental argument forward. It illuminates the culturally dysfunctional entanglement of women and nature, which permeated contemporaneous Western culture, and employs it to criticize improved spaces as sites of early American (patriarchal) violence.

Mary Shelley challenges the validity of the nature-culture binary when she writes improvement as triggering catastrophe in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*. Chapter Two consider how the novel images Victor Frankenstein as an improver, who attempts to modify nature by circumventing "natural" reproduction. But his creation defies his expectations; the Creature awakens as a hideous amalgam of nature and culture, and Victor immediately and unremittingly interprets him as a deformity. This chapter focuses on the negative consequences of improvement and considers how the novel challenges its reliance on the nature-culture dichotomy.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* echoes *Frankenstein*'s reliance on the "monster" figure, which transgressive characters like Jane embody. Chapter Three explores how,

like the Creature, Jane is an object of improvement. And while the novel combats her improvement by demonstrating how it continually fails her, the narrative also implies that rejecting improvement outright might be ruinous. This chapter investigates modified and unmodified landscapes, considers their entanglement with gender hierarchies, and demonstrates how "successful" improvement unconsciously undermines Victorian values: domesticity and virtue. Meanwhile, it explores how Brontë fuses nature and culture at Ferndean and represents this fusion as deformed.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* inverts Shelley's novel by personifying (female) Nature[9] as culture's improver. Chapter Four discusses Nature's improvements of three cultural symbols: The Pyncheon house, the garden, and Maule's well. It considers how these improvements often result in deformity and explores the novel's celebration of Nature's transformation of the well into a toxic environment. Finally, by investigating Phoebe and Holgrave's sometimes conflicted renegotiated relationship, which mirrors Nature's final partnership with the Pyncheon house, I demonstrate the novel's criticism of divisive binaries that uphold the idea of improvement.

I conclude this project by showing how treating the ecogothic as a critical lens only, and not a mode, offers new interpretive opportunities in even the most unlikely texts. This Coda takes a short passage from ecocriticism's urtext *Walden* and reframes it as a Gothic environmental intervention. In the opening of "Higher Laws" Thoreau

[9] Capitalizing the first letter of Nature signifies personification, which is always gendered female. Shelley, Brontë, and Hawthorne follow this convention. For the purposes of this project, I maintain their usage.

considers how utterly exciting it would be to consume raw one of his "neighbors," a woodchuck who regularly steals from his beanfield. For obvious reasons, no one has treated Thoreau as a Gothic writer, but employing an ecogothic lens helps us see how Thoreau Gothicizes wildness to make his environmental intervention concerning human dominance.

Extending Keetley and Sivils's work, my project reconsiders how Gothicism helped shape the American and British environmental imaginations—that is, how Gothicism enables texts to question and combat exploitive human engagements with the natural environment. For instance, Americanists often quickly highlight how writers like Thoreau criticized the idea of progress, especially how he chided political leaders who, while emphasizing national and individual progress, extended slavery westward, engaged in near-genocidal relations with Native Americans, and destroyed the American landscape along the way. However, writers such as Hawthorne used the Gothic to criticize progress. In "Rappaccini's Daughter," the author shows how Rappaccini's exploitation of nature—specifically, a poisonous flowering plant—caused the death of anything his daughter Beatrice breathed on and ultimately Beatrice's own death. He demonstrates how imbalanced relationships with the natural world, no matter the justification (i.e. scientific progress), yield human and nonhuman destruction alike. Hawthorne's criticism of progress functions differently than that of Thoreau. He exposes the same ideological problem as Thoreau does; however, he focuses primarily on

Rappaccini's, and so humanity's, tendency toward moral and psychic declension.[10] After all, it is Rappaccini's vice, his scientific obsession, that instigates his abuse of his daughter—she becomes an object of his scientific inquiry and experimentation and is, consequently, isolated from the outside world but not from cultivated nature.

My research benefits ecocriticism and nineteenth-century literary studies by emphasizing texts that challenge the notion that Emerson and Thoreau, and likeminded writers who idealized "untrammeled wilderness," primarily shaped American conceptions of "nature." While Emerson's and Thoreau's influence are undeniable, their centrality to ecocritical scholarship has often obscured the environmental import of writers who spoke indirectly about nature and who had wider readership. For instance, Hawthorne's implicitly environmental *The House of the Seven Gables* sold over 6,000 copies in its first year, and Thoreau's explicitly environmental *Walden* took nearly five years to sell only 2,000 copies. Yet few ecocritics have evaluated Hawthorne's culturally resonant novel. Thus, my project complicates the ecocritical canon, which often ignores texts whose environmentalism seems merely implied or even absent. Simultaneously, since my principal novels are infrequently treated ecocritically, my research offers these texts new interpretive valences. Finally, my project reevaluates how American and British environmental imaginations developed, anticipating that their histories are more complex than scholars have previously granted.

[10] These problems feature in Thoreau's writing as well, but they are the primary concern in Hawthorne's narrative.

CHAPTER II

(RE)WRITING THE LAND: IMPROVEMENT AS DISASTER IN *WIELAND*

> In all my rambles I never found a spot in which so many picturesque beauties and rural delights were assembled as at Mettingen. No corner of your little domain unites fragrance and secrecy in so perfect a degree as the recess in the bank. The odour of its leaves, the coolness of its shade, and the music of its water-fall, had early attracted my attention. Here my sadness was converted into peaceful melancholy—here my slumbers were sound, and my pleasures enhanced.
> --Carwin, *Wieland*

Clara Wieland is a rebel. But her rebellious spirit terrifies the men in her life, and so they react as scared men often do in such tales. At every turn they strive to repossess her, or rather "improve" her the way her brother Theodore incessantly "improves" the Mettingen landscape. Each of them—Henry Pleyel (Clara's love interest), Theodore, and the wanderer Carwin—invade her physical, psychological, or social spaces. As Clara journals, Pleyel sneaks into her bedroom, which is in a house that *she* owns, and peers over her shoulder to uncover her secret thoughts.[11] Carwin himself takes this control to the extreme, hiding in her closet and threatening to rape and kill her. Later, Theodore also sneaks into her bedroom and murders his wife there. While men try to control Clara at every turn, she has little recourse and little means to respond on her own behalf, representing women's disempowerment in the late eighteenth century. However, she does reclaim power through one male-dominated medium: writing.

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[11] And later, convinced she has an illicit sexual relationship with Carwin, Pleyel jealously slanders her, attempting to control her by threatening her reputation.

Clara's writing is crucial given the novel's historical inspiration: the 1781 Yates family murders. One evening, following the directives of what he called the "Spirit,"[12] James Yates murdered his "idols," his wife and four children, and attempted to murder his sister. And like Theodore Wieland, who expresses no guilt during his confession (though he eventually comes to his senses), Yates expressed no remorse for his actions whatsoever. Interestingly, the newspapers did not widely disseminate this story, and the first full-length rendering was not published for fifteen years. The gruesome recounting that was finally published in 1796 describes Yates's sister[13] as having torn a "trammel from the chimney, bound him with it to the bed post," and "fastening his hands behind him" ("An Account" 28). The news article uses only a few lines to offer her perspective, but it never directly quotes her, despite her being "the principal evidence against" Yates ("An Account" 28). And this major point is where Brown's novel deviates: he gives the lone survivor a voice. Indeed, as the novel's narrator, *Clara* and no one else takes charge of recording and controlling how her family history, its key players, and the Mettingen estate are represented.

Clara's voice is critical, as she not only describes her brother's murders but reshapes her family history by connecting this history directly to the landscape. Currently, no critics have considered how Clara writes the landscape specifically as another object of male conquest and, arguably, as her doppelganger. I contend that interpreting the Mettingen landscape through Clara's eyes—that is, seeing the landscape

[12] In Yate's testimony he claims that two Spirits appeared to him, one bidding him to "destroy all [his] idols" and the other attempting to "dissuade [him]" (Anna 20).
[13] The news article keeps her anonymous, but it does so for many other individuals as well.

as a late-eighteenth-century woman's re-creation—demonstrates how Brown's first novel confronts the harmful entanglement of women and nature. I argue that through Clara's narrative, Brown features isolation, transgression, and deformity in built and natural environments to criticize how many early Americans envisioned and violated nature. Specifically, Brown confronts misapprehensions about the perils of wilderness and marks "improved" spaces as signaling American society's environmental devastation.

I begin by showing that although Clara's story follows the more "conservative" didactic novel frame, her "moral" is actually quite subversive, therefore supporting my argument about the novel's overall subversiveness. Subsequently, I consider how Clara aligns death with improvement in two male-dominated built environments, the temple and her own bedroom. Finally, I investigate how deformity and isolation intersect in two designed landscapes, Pleyel's estate and Mettingen, and often evoke Clara's anxiety about men's violence.

Clara's Voice and *Wieland*'s Didactic "Limitations"

My argument about the eco-subversiveness of Clara's narrative voice is immediately complicated by her didacticism. Most explicitly, the epigraph moralizes about the dangers of deception, claiming: "From Virtue's blissful paths away / The double-tongued are sure to stray; / Good is a forth-right journey still, / And mazy paths but lead to ill" (*Wieland* 1). Furthermore, in the novel's opening, Clara professes that she hopes her tale "will inculcate the duty of avoiding deceit …, exemplify the force of early impressions, and show the immeasurable evils that flow from an erroneous or imperfect

discipline" (5). And she recapitulates these ideas in the novel's final lines. If taken at face value, Clara's moralizing competes with many readings of the novel (including mine), readings that highlight that it is far more than an educational apparatus.

American fiction through the 1790s was generally expected to function didactically. Conduct books frequently expressed worry that readers of fiction, who were primarily women, would begin fantasizing about a life other than a domestic one. That is, fiction particularly might inspire women to explore alternative modes of living, which could "devastate" the family structure, the very foundation of the fragile, newborn Republic and its emerging, distinctly *American* culture. Therefore, the first American novels maintained the same didactic formulation as earlier printed texts. The era's central works, which include William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, all contain explicitly didactic components. For example, Rowson's preface claims that her novel is "for the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex," to "save" at least "one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent" (5).

Wieland follows this formula. Even its advertisement, which immediately preceded the original publication's first chapter, submits to convention when Brown ponders, "Whether this tale will be classed with the ordinary or frivolous sources of amusement, or be ranked with the few productions whose usefulness secures to them a lasting reputation, the reader must be permitted to decide" (*Wieland* 3). Importantly,

Brown leaves it to "readers," rather than critics, to determine for themselves the novel's merits. That subtly subversive fact suggests that Brown is using the novel's moral tone to perform obeisance to American print culture, meanwhile undermining its demand for conventional morality.[14] Yet some scholars interpret Brown's ostensible commitment to the didactic component seriously. Michael D. Bell goes so far as to call Brown a "[moralist]" who "feared that fiction would upset the mental balance of novel-readers" (147). However, Thomas Koenigs notes that the novel's "*clear didactic project* … is complicated by the way in which the novel continuously questions the efficacy—and even possibility—of education" (715, emphasis added). He ultimately argues that the tension between *Wieland*'s didacticism and its skepticism suggests a "metadidactic critique of contemporary pedagogical theory that responds to and rejects exemplary education" (715).

Other scholars like Jay Fliegelman dismiss the novel's didacticism altogether (239). But Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro offer one of the most nuanced interpretations, arguing that the novel's "call for sincerity" must be contextualized by Brown's Woldwinite (Wollstonecraftian-Godwinian) philosophy. The term "Woldwinite" denotes a cluster of late eighteenth-century writers including Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Erasmus Darwin, Robert Bage, and Thomas Holcroft. These writers, especially Godwin and Wollstonecraft, heavily influenced Brown and his close friends

[14] The limited available printing presses in the eighteenth century made printing costs quite high. So, printed materials were rarely intended for mere entertainment, which explains why presses were printing so much nonfiction in early America: sermons, captivity narratives (which served as testimonials, spiritual inspiration, and lessons on how to handle the "Indian problem," among other moral lessons), conversion narratives, news, and eventually political works.

Elihu Hubbard Smith and William Dunlap. For Woldwinites, and certainly for Brown also, "sincerity" implied more than mere honesty. As Barnard and Shapiro put it, "Sincerity is a multi-leveled political agenda that seeks to remove an entire standing order of political and religious imposture … a practice that will germinate to undermine vested, self-serving interests and replace them with a more equal and transparent society" (xx-xxi). Barnard and Shapiro demonstrate that *Wieland*'s didacticism is complicated and unconventional because of the meaning it implies. That is to say, *Wieland* is conventional in form, but subversive in meaning. Thus, I contend that the notion of sincerity as a political argument undermining inequality, alongside a woman's narrative voice, implies the novel's feminist agenda.

Brown's aim, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock puts it, is to "[dramatize] women's disempowerment in late eighteenth-century Euro-American culture, to highlight the forces of explicit and implicit violence used against women to coerce their submission, and to critique these forms of oppression" (123). Scholars generally accept this view. Most famously, perhaps, Jane Thompkins argues "that *Wieland* was not designed as a well-made novel, but as a political tract" (44). Indeed, reading the novel as subversive, while it maintains the air of convention, aligns more directly with Brown's other writings where he outlines his literary approach.[15]

Those scholars who read *Wieland* as a feminist and highly seditious tract make compelling arguments. But Brown's sedition is frequently subsurface. His criticisms, particularly those about nature, are indirect like many Gothic novels. But he employs

[15] See Brown's essay "Walstein's School of History."

Clara's voice, which controls every detail of the novel, to (re)write the idyllic American landscape as an ecogothic space that recasts America's relationship with nature as violent and destructive, and as threatening the stability of the newly formed Republic.

Built Environments: The Temple and Clara's Bedroom

I begin my analysis of *Wieland* by considering the intersection of improvement with deformity and isolation in Mettingen's principal built environments, the temple and Clara's bedroom. Mettingen sits "within a few miles" of Philadelphia, but its inhabitants feel the weight of isolation. Clara even remembers how "the loneliness of their dwelling prevented [her mother] from joining any established congregation" (11). We should note that Clara, the narrator, is both articulating her perception of her mother's experience of isolation and making no case to the contrary concerning her own experience. However isolated, Mettingen is a developed estate, together with lawns, houses, gardens, and slave-worked farmland. But the estate is bordered by unruly, wild nature on all sides.

While the source of Clara's terror always comes from within the developed estate (something I discuss in more detail later), she articulates how the elder Wieland's comes from outside it: from the wild spaces. Like so many colonial missionaries, he considers it "his duty to disseminate the truths of the gospel among the unbelieving nations," and "the North-American Indians naturally presented themselves as the first objects for this species of benevolence" (Brown, *Wieland* 9). However, he expresses such severe anxiety concerning the local tribes' "savage manners" that he delays his task for fourteen years (9). His experience was not far from those of many early Americans.

Susan Scott Parrish cites early American humoralism, the belief that the balance of the four humors (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm) leads to physical and mental health,[16] as significantly contributing to fears of American nature. While nature provided settlers opportunities for economic improvement through property accumulation, agriculture, and trade, pervading humoralistic beliefs evoked fears of colonials' physical, psychic, and moral declension (134). As environmental humoralism incited fear that nature would cause harmful metamorphoses to naturalized Europeans, colonials began sending out Native Americans and enslaved Africans to nature's inner sanctum to collect specimens, and so prevented what they feared would be their own environmentally induced degeneration (216). For colonials this fear came from several directions: indigenous tribes, evil spiritual power, and humoral decline, all of which were located in nature (especially wilderness). Nature as a place of contemplation or leisure had yet to enter the American mind. Parrish's account corresponds with the elder Wieland's feelings and experiences, for when he returns from the wilderness, Clara recalls how he had been overcome with "incredible fatigues, hunger, sickness, and solitude" (10). And "solitude" here seems to imply unhealthy isolation, contrasting with the "solitude" he later takes in the temple.

After his return home, the elder Wieland's fear of wilderness manifests most explicitly when he constructs for his deity the temple, a space that effectively separates him from nature's threats. Quite unlike the later American Romantics, the "solitude" his religion required could only be achieved by improving the natural environment, as well

[16] Humoral imbalances, which purportedly caused diseases, led to treatments like bloodletting.

as isolating himself inside a built environment that shielded him from the wildness and even the cultivated landscape outside its walls. Clara describes this place in detail:

> At the distance of three hundred yards from his house, on the top of a rock whose sides were steep, rugged, and encumbered with dwarf cedars and stony asperities, he built what to a common eye would have seemed a summer-house. The eastern verge of this precipice was sixty feet above the river which flowed at its foot. The view before it consisted of a transparent current, fluctuating and rippling in a rocky channel, and bounded by a rising scene of cornfields and orchards. The edifice was slight and airy. It was no more than a circular area, twelve feet in diameter, whose flooring was the rock, cleared of moss and shrubs, and exactly levelled, edged by twelve Tuscan columns, and covered by an undulating dome. … It was without seat, table, or ornament of any kind. (10-11)

This spot characterizes how early Americans viewed wild nature—as dangerous and potentially degenerative physically, psychologically, and morally/spiritually. The temple's surrounding environment certainly threatens the elder Wieland's physical safety. The language Clara uses to describe the rock suggests this threat and the difficulty anyone would have as they approach the building. She juxtaposes the rock's "steep" and "rugged" surface, the "dwarf-cedars" and "rocky asperities" that "encumbered" or limited human mobility, and the eastern rockface, which falls some sixty feet into a rocky river channel, with the rock floor inside the empty temple, which the elder Wieland "cleared of moss and shrubs" and "exactly levelled." This juxtaposition subtly illuminates how Brown Gothicizes the natural setting to frame his novel. In this case, the safety of the temple's utterly modified interior guards against the natural hazards, which ceaselessly threaten injury or death, directly outside.

Contrastingly, the narrative describes the distant and seemingly benign cultivated lands, cornfields and orchards, without assigning or otherwise suggesting a single

negative value, something I discuss in detail later. Nature that directly surrounds the temple, however, appears as always competing with human interests and so necessarily requires improvement or extraction. Indeed, the only "natural" thing left in the empty built environment is the rock floor, which still required extensive, even excessive, modification to suit the elder Wieland's needs. The contrast between wild nature and the empty temple suggests his view that the erasure of nature supports "healthy solitude," safety, and, echoing colonial Americans, welcomes the divine presence. And so Brown frames the built environment as the space into which the novel's men enter to form and affirm delusions of security and power.

Although the elder Wieland feels safest from the natural world inside his temple, Clara (the narrating self) knows that such safety is illusory and interprets this point of her family's history differently. She identifies the temple, *not* wild nature, as the real site of terror by associating it with the elder Wieland's uncanny and untimely death. In fact, while the elder Wieland perhaps unexpectedly never succumbs to nature's degenerative effects outside the temple, he does spontaneously combust inside it, which renders him "nearly in a state of insensibility," quickly induces "fever and delirium," and "in the course of two hours [gives] place to death. Yet not till insupportable exhalations and crawling putrefaction had driven from his chamber and the house every one whom their duty did not detain" (17). The catastrophic events that occurred inside the temple utterly severed any connection Clara could experience with her father and mother. Prior to her father's death, with the exception of fulfilling "duty," no one neared his decaying body. Furthermore, Clara associates the shock of these incidents with her mother's subsequent

mysterious sickness and with both parents' deaths, forever marking the temple, the space where the elder Wieland exerted the most power over nature, as the space that all but destroyed this American family. Indeed, Clara, who was only six when her parents died, professes, "the impressions that were then made upon me, can never be effaced" (17). Brown the contrasting utterly modified, sterile temple with its rugged natural surroundings, suggesting that the real threats to early Republic lie within.

Indeed, employing isolation—which manifest as the physical and social separation, and literal and psychological avoidance of nature's presence—Brown criticizes the colonial project, particularly as it relates to the location of its threats. As my prior discussion suggests, scholars have read *Wieland* as conveying Brown's cynicism toward the newly formed Republic. For instance, Barnard and Shapiro note that *Wieland* illuminates "Brown's awareness of the cause of the exaggerated fears of foreign subversion that circulated through America in 1798" (xlvi). They contend that "Brown perceives the manner in which the ruling Federalist Party and associated clerical elites constructed widespread fear of perceived foreign threats as a smoke screen intended to mystify the ruling order's refusal to risk more democracy and social justice" (xlvi). While Brown's gothic themes clearly manifest his political arguments, no one has yet considered these themes from an environmental perspective. Brown specifically identifies the most constructed and male-dominated space in Mettingen as the real threat, not wilderness, as his readers would have expected. The tragic events that transpire inside the temple imply his criticism about how early Americans, like Clara's father, have exploited nature through land acquisition and modification. And this exploitation touches anyone

linked to the land: Native Americans, who surround Mettingen and whom settlers dispossessed of land; enslaved Africans, who worked the farmland; and women, who eventually become the objects of male violence. While the novel's action unfolds, Clara's psychological disturbance intensifies as men modify nature and as those modification become more apparent.

Following the elder Wieland's death, the narrative jumps to Theodore's and Clara's young adulthood, when they live a leisurely life at Mettingen. Readers will also recall how Theodore has now married Clara's childhood friend Catharine and how they together have four children and a ward, Louisa Conway. Like his father, Theodore continually modifies the estate, and his transformation of the temple becomes his earliest and most important modification. Despite the temple's disturbing associations during their childhood, it now functions as "a place of resort in the evenings of summer" (2), where the Wielands (and later Pleyel) enjoy art, music, conversations, and community. In striking contrast with her previous assessment, Clara even comments that "every joyous and tender scene most dear to my memory, is connected with this edifice" (22).[17] The temple's transformation initiates a narrative shift, allowing a new site to emerge where men explore and express their power: Clara's bedroom. Scholars have commented on how men regularly invade this space.[18] As the temple had been the site where the elder Wieland attempted to eradicate nature, which late-eighteenth century writers incessantly

[17] One avenue I would like to explore concerns how the younger Wieland generation improves the temple again by filling it and repurposing it.
[18] See Barnard and Shapiro for further discussion on men's assumed rights to invade Clara's space (xxxv).

represented as female, so also Clara's bedroom becomes the site where a man literally suffocates female agency.

It is important to note at this point the unconventionality of Clara's living arrangements. She and her brother received *equal* portions of the family inheritance; and although Theodore inherited the master-house, Clara became the head of her own house, and she retains her own female servant. As Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro put it, "Clara initially seems to bridge the gender divide as she attempts to enjoy the benefits of both masculinity and femininity" (xxxv). But, as a single woman, or *feme sole*, she was not yet legally restricted by coverture. She retained the legal rights to live with relative autonomy,[19] which marriage would dissolve. Coverture, as Dorothy A. Mays articulates, "relegated the wife to the legal status of a child" (91) and was in full force in early America. Adopted from British common law, coverture stipulated that "all property a woman brought into a marriage, including real estate, clothing, furniture, or money, became the property of her husband" (Mays 91). Moreover, Linda K. Kerber remarks that "coverture was based on the assumption that married women had neither independent minds nor independent power" (152-153), and she further highlights how this assumption easily "transferred to single women" during the period (152). This ideological transference suggests that as long as Clara remains a *feme sole,* she threatens male power. Not surprisingly, her autonomy provokes men's anxiety and catalyzes their unending attempts to "improve" her.

[19] An unmarried woman had the legal rights to sign contracts, file lawsuits, and own property, rights that were transferred to her husband upon marriage.

Men's constant invasion of Clara's private space illuminates their deeply seated fears about how her transgressions of domestic order might undermine male power. Most significantly, when Theodore murders his wife Catharine in Clara's bedroom, he conveys that proper domesticity is nonagentic (which strangulation and death symbolize), and effectively threatens his sister to conform to gendered expectations. Theodore completes this violent and invasive act during the novel's climax and under the directives of what he believes are "divine" voices. No ecocritics have considered this invasion as echoing Theodore's horticultural "improvements" of the Mettingen landscape.

The novel's women, principally Clara and Catharine, are dissimilar embodiments of nature. Like wild nature, the unconventional Clara is the continual object of male "improvement" (men's forays into her bedroom are attempts to bring her to heel). However, much like the Mettingen landscape, Catharine fastidiously fulfills her domestic function and so represents nature as already "improved." One significant historical fact supports this reading. Annette Kolodny has amply demonstrated that the early American images of nature and women are utterly enmeshed. She observes that "by the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was relatively commonplace for colonial promoters to promise prospective immigrants a '*Paradise* with all her virgin beauties'" (3, emphasis original). This language, quite obviously, implies virgin land or wilderness. And it is male—figuratively sexual—violence that tames wild, virginal nature. Brown uses Theodore's violent invasion of Clara's bedroom to illuminate how men's hierarchical and exploitive relationships with women/nature are unsustainable and mutually

devastating. And Brown deploys delusion, transgression, and deformity to make this argument.

Rather than ever questioning his sanity, Theodore depends on one key delusion to rationalize familicide: that the disembodied voices he hears are divine. And disbelieving them would only indicate that the family curse has indeed infected him, a thought too difficult to bear. But interpreting these voices as auditory hallucinations that project Theodore's suppressed desire to dominate (female) nature reframes the murder. It reworks Brown's exploration of the extremes of male power (an important interpretation) into a complaint about early National ideologies that support environmental exploitation.

While this exploitation was economically productive, Brown illustrates that an already deformed ideology precipitates such exploitation. Moments prior to her murder Catharine recognizes Theodore's terrifying transformation, "'O Wieland! Wieland! God grant that I am mistaken; but surely something is wrong. I see it: it is too plain: thou art undone—lost to me and to thyself" (158). And once he finally admits his plan to sacrifice her life to his deity, the panic-stricken Catharine voices, "I see—thou art Wieland no longer! A fury resistless and horrible possess thee" (159). Sacrificing Catharine to what he believes is a noble end, Theodore mirrors the kind of reasoning that supported American misuse of land and the indigenous populations who occupied it. For example, expansionism, which began during the colonial era and extended well through the nineteenth century, initially resulted from ever-increasing immigration, which required increasingly large tracts of land to farm and raise animals to sustain the growing

population.[20] Colonials used their survival and economic needs to justify taking and developing "wild" lands. Brown's novel uses Theodore's psychological break to represents this kind of justification. Catharine's language subtly dehumanizes him and explicitly depersonalizes him.

Furthermore, the novel formulates Theodore's final "improvement" of Catharine as disfiguring her body, symbolically representing "improved" nature. "Her eye-balls started from their sockets," Theodore remember, "Grimness and distortion took place of all that used to bewitch me into transport, and subdue me into reverence" (159). Moments later, Catharine's disfigured body temporarily forces Theodore to reawaken from his delusion and face the material consequences of his violation, and he sinks into despair. "Where is her bloom!" he cries, "These deadly and blood-suffused orbs but ill resembled the azure and exstatic [*sic*] tenderness of her eyes" (160). Theodore's murder of the "improved" woman (nature) suggests the novel's proto-ecofeminist criticism: just as women's disempowerment precipitates the family's destruction rather than its protection, so also nature's exploitation ("improvement") threatens the Nation.

The novel ultimately represents environmental exploitation in the grossest terms, through Theodore's figurative and incestuous rape of Clara. This metaphorical transgression manifests as his unsolicited and nonconsensual entrance into Clara's private space, her bedroom, followed by his strangulation of Catharine, his proxy sister, and reclining her body on Clara's own bed. Theodore's transgressions reorient what should have been Clara's safest space into the most dangerous space in Mettingen, suggesting

[20] See Susan Scott Parrish for more details on colonial expansion.

Brown's argument that the environments where most Americans felt secure where precisely the places that witnessed the most violence and actually warranted the most caution. That is, Catharine's murder offers the image of tamed land (Catharine's body), not as an economically productive subjugation of nature, but as utterly destructive of both the land and the patriarchal society (Theodore later commits suicide when he comes to his senses). Furthermore, read as a rape scene, Theodore's violence signals a threat to wild nature (Clara), marking Brown's concerns about American expansionism. Brown thus metaphorically and prophetically represents National attitudes and behaviors toward nature, which originated when Europeans first settled the Country, as something that will ultimately unravel the very fabric of American society.

Brown further reveals his cynicism when Clara discovers Catharine's disheveled body and falls into despair. Clara remembers:

> I approached the corpse: I lifted the still flexible hand, and kissed the lips which were breathless. Her flowering drapery was discomposed. I restored it to order, and seating myself on the bed, again fixed stedfast [*sic*] eyes upon her countenance. I cannot distinctly recollect the ruminations of that moment. I saw confusedly, but forcibly, that every hope was extinguished with the life of *Catharine*. (141, emphasis original)

Interestingly, the *unconventional* woman (unimproved nature), the one who most threatens male power, "[restores]" the conventional woman's "flowering drapery … to order." This act marks Clara's resignation of hope and, indeed, of agency, as the narrative later resolves with her marriage to Henry Pleyel, effectively terminating her rights as a *feme sole*. And all that was hers becomes his. She notes that this resignation came "forcibly," implying that just as men's violence birthed the Nation, so also men's

violence will sustain their power over marginalized Others—women, children, people of color, and nature—and this power and violence has no end in sight.

Previously, Clara intimated that that the temple, a male-controlled place devoid of nature, incites her terror. Discovering Catharine's body in her bedroom, her most private space, but also a space made by men and devoid of nature, validates her feelings. By interweaving isolation, delusion, transgression, and deformity, Brown suggests his skepticism about whether America's trajectory, especially with its ceaseless land-grabbing, could ever be redirected before it is too late. He corroborates this skepticism by representing "improved" natural environments as spaces where men assert power and where Clara eventually discovers she is also unsafe.

Designed Landscapes: Pleyel's Estate and Mettingen

This section discusses how Clara responds negatively to deformity and the isolation of two contrasting designed landscapes, Pleyel's estate and Mettingen, and it identifies landscape "improvement" as manifesting patriarchal violence. Connecting "artificiality" with isolation and deformity, Brown deploys Clara's reactions to Pleyel's inadequately designed estate to underscore how excessive male power often causes detrimental environmental effects. Clara accentuates how Pleyel regularly walked alone there along the banks of the Delaware River after his first love interest's death (44). Thus, she immediately associates this space with Pleyel's physical and emotional isolation. And his home's "artificiality" exaggerates this gloomy experience. "This bank is an artificial one" Clara observes; "reeds and the river are on one side, and a watery marsh on the

other, in that part which bounded his lands, and which extended from the mouth of Hollander's creek to that of Schuylkill. No scene can be imagined less enticing to a lover of the picturesque than this" (44). "Artificiality," in the sense that Clara uses the term, implies landscape modification that employs an obvious and therefore poor application of human artifice. She aligns this "artificiality" with the space's sterility and excessive growth of putrid and sickening things:

> The shore is deformed with mud, and incumbered with a forest of reeds. The fields, in most seasons, are mire; but when they afford a firm footing, the ditches by which they are bounded and intersected, are mantled with stagnating green, and emit the most noxious exhalations. Health is no less a stranger to those seats than pleasure. Spring and autumn are sure to be accompanied with agues and bilious remittents [*sic*]. (44)

Nature, at every turn, appears unproductive and dangerous. The fields are usually a "mire," earth so saturated that it eliminates any possibility of vegetable production.[21] And when the season "[affords] a firm footing," presumably for what should have been leisurely rambles through the fields, the ditches surrounding them provoke disease. Indeed, their "stagnating green," which is an ironic description (as green so often indicates plant health), "noxious exhalations," and "agues and bilious remittents" associates this insufficient improvement—this artificiality—with disease.

Strikingly, Clara's description echoes the language early Americans often used to describe *uncultivated* land, particularly wilderness. Most notably, Mary Rowlandson, whose 1682 captivity narrative won international fame during the author's lifetime,

[21] Vegetable roots generally need well-draining soil, otherwise plants could underproduce, become stunted, or even die, depending on the degree the soil retains water.

anticipates Brown's ecogothic depictions. She remembers her trials under Native American captivity:

> We traveled about half a day or little more, and came to a desolate place in the wilderness, where there were no wigwams or inhabitants before; we came about the middle of the afternoon to this place, cold and wet, and snowy, and hungry, and weary, and no refreshing (for man) but the cold ground to sit on, and our poor Indian cheer. (27-28)

Rowlandson's language sounds markedly like Clara's as she represents wilderness, not an "improved" estate, as isolated and empty. Like Pleyel's estate, Rowlandson characterizes wilderness as carry significant negative health implications. She links every physical sensation with her suffering. "Cold and wet, and snowy" sensations weaken her body, alongside hunger and exhaustion. This place also only magnifies her loneliness as no one or nothing can improve her situation except, as she notes quite sarcastically, "our poor Indian cheer." Like Pleyel's experience while mourning his beloved, Rowlandson's physical suffering and isolation only intensify her anguish. She continues:

> My head was light and dizzy (either through hunger or hard lodging, or trouble or all together), my knees feeble, my body raw by sitting double night and day, that I cannot express to man the affliction that lay upon my spirit; but the lord helped me at that time to express it to himself. (28).

As her wilderness captivity overwhelmed her, Rowlandson admits that only divine intervention could relieve her.

This desperation also becomes clear in Brown's novel when the Wielands relieve Pleyel of "the unwholesome airs of [Pleyel's] own residence" by inviting him to live a while at Mettingen (*Wieland* 44). While Rowlandson's and Brown's natural descriptions

hold many similarities, they diverge in one significant way: their locations of threats. Brown reframes colonial wilderness discourses, highlighting not the perils of wilderness, but rather the hazards of the *cultivated estate*. This reversal implicitly criticizes how early Americans such as Rowlandson branded wilderness as antagonistic to American civilization and contends that nature really becomes dangerous only *after* men have degraded (improved) it, suggesting that "civilization" is the real National threat.

Furthermore, we could interpret Clara's complaint about "artificiality" another way, which subsequent scenes support, that "artificiality" is not so much a problem, but rather the *appearance* of artificiality. And indeed, the picturesque estate conventionally should appear "natural." Clara's contention with Pleyel's estate is really contention with the obvious presence of male control, which she witnesses as *interference* with the natural scenery. Indeed, she has already detailed the childhood horror of losing her father, horror that violently began inside Mettingen's most male dominated, "artificial" space: the temple. Likewise, she interprets Pleyel's cultivated estate with the same dread, the same caution, that she originally ascribes to the temple.

However, Clara admits she enjoys Mettingen, a meticulously designed estate with clearly developed spaces like the orchards and farmland. Yet while she does frequently enjoy her home's picturesque scenes, she can only do so when these scenes *appear* unmodified, or when man's improvements are invisible. Indeed, when she compares her home with Pleyel's, she focuses on the undeveloped river. She observes, "The scenes which environed our dwellings at Mettingen constituted the reverse of Pleyel's … Schuylkill was here a pure and translucid current, broken into wild and ceaseless music

by rocky points, murmuring on a sandy margin, and reflecting on its surface, banks of all varieties of height and degrees of declivity" (44). "Pure" and "translucid" carry a double meaning. Literally, they refer to the river's clarity; but they also suggest that the river is, or at least seems to be, in an unaltered state. The "wild" music that the river's rapids create further supports this figurative interpretation. The first and primary thing Clara wants her reader to envision about her home is that it seems less affected by human artifice than Pleyel's.

Yet she knows that much of the estate's beauty owes itself to her brother's landscape design. While she mentions that "these banks were chequered by patches of dark verdure," which seem natural, she concedes without apology that the estate was heavily modified:

> crowned by copses of cedar, or by the regular magnificence of orchards, which, at this season, were in blossom and were prodigal of odours. The ground which receded from the river was scooped into valleys and dales. Its beauties were enhanced by the horticultural skill of my brother, who bedecked this exquisite assemblage of slopes and risings with every species of vegetable ornament, from the giant arms of the oak to the clustering tendrils of the honey-suckle (44).

That is to say, this property's focal points are the trees and other vegetation, *all* of which ("every species") her brother planted. However, unlike Pleyel's property, Theodore's plantings work together with the land's original contour in such a way as to appear entirely natural. This seeming continuity between nature and artifice intimates why Clara idealizes Mettingen's landscape. And since she readily admits that her main point of contention is with "artificiality," her narrative suggests that when men's control over the

land is masked (or, when "artificiality" is masked), despite her knowledge of its actual presence, she can more easily suppress her anxiety about these places.

Indeed, in one important episode, nature's presence elides Theodore's landscape modifications and enraptures Clara. Before nightfall, she makes her way to her "favorite retreat," and while she readily identifies built structures, these pale in comparison to their natural surroundings. Clara describes the spot in detail:

> Some weeks after this I had spent a toilsome day, and, as the sun declined, found myself disposed to seek relief in a walk. The river bank is, at this part of it, and for some considerable space upward, so rugged and steep as not to be easily descended. In a recess of this declivity, near the southern verge of my little demesne, was placed a slight building, with seats and lattices. From a crevice of the rock, to which this edifice was attached, there burst forth a stream of the purest water, which, leaping from ledge to ledge, for the space of sixty feet, produced a freshness in the air, and a murmur, the most delicious and soothing imaginable. These, added to the odours of the cedars which embowered it, and of the honey-suckle which clustered among the lattices, rendered this my favorite retreat in summer. (57-58)

This scene embodies successful improvement in that "nature" and human artifice converge rather than compete with one another. Indeed, nature envelops or overshadows the obviously built things, like the building, seats, and lattices. The "rugged and steep" terrain, the stream, and the presence of a building seem quite similar to the temple location. However, this building, which only receives passing mention here, is "slight" and is unenclosed. The contrast between these constructed things and nature only obfuscates the fact that nature here is also constructed. Clara knows well that Theodore planted the cedars and honey-suckles, but they appear natural, and so mask the overshadowing male presence, allowing her to revel in this spot.

But Clara's reverie is broken as she drifts to sleep, and her "dreams of no cheerful hue" expose her suppressed anxieties about this place, especially its connection to male power. Brown deploys deformity and isolation to accomplish this task and to problematize men's relationships with nature. "After various incoherences had taken their turn to occupy my fancy," Clara recalls, "I at length imagined myself walking, in the evening twilight, to my brother's habitation" (58). Clara's dream repeats her frequent pattern of spending evenings with Theodore. Importantly, this scene does not occur at either of their residences, but rather in between them—a distance of three-quarters of mile—subtly uniting Clara's the improved landscape with Clara's imminent terror. It is at this site where she notices that "a pit … had been dug in the path I had taken, of which I was not aware" (58). As she previously noted, Theodore makes *all* the landscape modifications at Mettingen. So, the pit located directly in her usual path was certainly his. And her dreaming mind realizes this connection as her dream unfolds:

> As I carelessly pursued my walk, I thought I saw my brother, standing at some distance before me, beckoning and calling me to make haste. He stood on the opposite edge of the gulph. I mended my pace, and one step more would have plunged me into this abyss, had not some one from behind caught suddenly my arm, and exclaimed, in a voice of eagerness and terror, "Hold! hold!" (58)

Clara's dream illustrates an alternate perspective about her brother's control over the landscape. Rather than envisioning him in his usual occupation modifying or maintaining the picturesque estate, she witnesses him, after having made a dangerous landscape modification, calling her to her death. And the "abyss," which is suggestive of hell, marks Mettingen as a concealed site of immense suffering (also foreshadowing her brother's

violent rampage). Her dream reorients Theodore's landscape work as something utterly treacherous. Like Pleyel's estate, nature at Mettingen only appears dangerous or terrifying *after* man has altered it, and so these alterations read as land deformity.

As Clara awakens and this knowledge about Mettingen's abounding dangers emerges, nature itself confines her and swarms her with terror:

> The sound broke my sleep, and I found myself, at the next moment, standing on my feet, and surrounded by the deepest darkness. Images so terrific and forcible disabled me, for a time, from distinguishing between sleep and wakefulness, and withheld from me the knowledge of my actual condition. My first panics were succeeded by the perturbations of surprise, to find myself alone in the open air, and immersed in so deep a gloom. (58)

While the open air was not long before balmy, it now overwhelms Clara. "Deepest darkness" restricts her physical mobility and conjures antagonistic and ghastly fancies. Whereas Clara's dream previously depicted nature as deformed, once she awakens, Brown represents modified nature as distorting *her* conceptions of reality—or "knowledge of [her] actual condition," as she puts it—triggering her depression.[22] In so doing, Brown harnesses ecogothic's force to illuminate how excessively altering natural environments tends to backfire, carrying adverse implications for humans.

Following this moment, the actual presence of a man shrouded in darkness demonstrates why Clara's panic is warranted. It effectively illustrates the dangers of male-dominated nature, even when the male presence is *not* readily visible. The voice

[22] The Oxford English Dictionary notes how "gloom" was originally used poetically. While the word has literally meant "darkness or obscurity," it figuratively referred to "a state of melancholy or depression." Therefore, "by association with the figurative sense …, the word has laterally tended to denote a painful or depressing darkness" ("gloom, n.1.").

that awakened Clara crying "Hold! Hold!," which we later discover is Carwin's, speaks again and claims both this natural site and Clara as his own. "I leagued to murder you" Carwin reminds her, "I repent. Mark my bidding, and be safe. Avoid this spot. The snares of death encompass it. Elsewhere danger will be distant; but this spot, shun it as you value your life" (59). Carwin later reveals that he threatened Clara so he could continue using this location for his paid sexual rendezvous with Clara's servant Judith. So, nature becomes a tool by which he conquers them both.

Interestingly, while some scholars criticize the novel's inclusion of Carwin,[23] I argue that the novel's environmental argument falls apart without him. His speech disrupts Clara's delusions and engenders another major psychological shift, this time concerning the landscape, affirming what her dreams merely suggested. Ultimately, Clara's fear of "improved" nature, which strikingly contrasts with many early Americans' fears of wilderness, problematizes how men interact with the natural environment and how women remain unsafe there, not because of the dangers inherently located there, but because of the dangers located within the patriarchal society.

As an eighteenth-century American woman Clara has no political power. But Brown uses her narrative voice to (re)write the American landscape. While other scholars' readings frequently focus on religious extremism or Brown's criticisms of the early Republic, deploying the ecogotic lens refocuses attention on the novel's engagement with landscape improvement and personal improvement. Brown not only

[23] See Nina Baym, "A Minority Reading of *Wieland*," Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown, Edited by Bernard Rosenthal, Hall, 1981. This essay is still commonly cited by Brown scholars.

questions the validity of wilderness anxieties, which the elder Wieland exemplifies, but he also reimagines improvement as a pervasive source of patriarchal violence. Transforming the text into an example of early American environmentalism, the ecogothic lens highlights how Brown envisions improvement as utterly destructive, which Mary Shelley later augments. Indeed, for Brown, improvement equals death.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND BINARIES: INDETERMINACY AS DEFORMITY IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

> [Man] is to a certain extent ruler of all the elements that surround him; and he is capable of using not only common matter according to his will and inclinations, but likewise of subjecting to his purposes the ethereal principles of heat and light. By his inventions they are elicited from the atmosphere; and under his control they become, according to circumstances, instruments of comfort and enjoyment, or of terror and destruction.
> --Sir Humphry Davy, *Discourses*

> … if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear …
> --The Creature, *Frankenstein*

Charles Brockden Brown writes improvement as overwhelmingly dangerous, equating it with the decline of the American family and ultimately death. Mary Shelley, who was reading *Wieland* in 1815 (*The Journals* 89),[24] illustrates that notion of improvement is not necessarily harmful, but rather that the real threat lies with improvement theory's commonplace assumptions about the relationship between humans and the other-than-human world or, put in ecocritical terms, between culture and nature. Improvement discourses in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century incessantly privileged human design at the expense of nonhuman nature. This privileging often

[24] She and Percy read nearly all of Brown's novels between 1814 and 1817, including *Clara Howard*, *Jane Talbot*, *Ormond*, and *Arthur Mervyn*. Percy, and perhaps Mary, also read *Edgar Huntly* (*The Journals* 86-100).

manifested as estate development, exemplified in Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park*,[25] as well as agricultural innovations like monoculture, as described by William Wordsworth in "A Walk on Salisbury Plain."[26] *Frankenstein* combats improvement's dualistic, and certainly hierarchical, suppositions by demonstrating the interconnectivity of humans and nonhuman nature. Shelley's novel illustrates that one cannot alter "nature" without also altering oneself, and that the idea of "improvement" merely obfuscates this reality. Deploying a Creature whom Victor cannot clearly delineate as an entirely natural or cultural entity—indeed, whose identity is indeterminable—Shelley disrupts the binary that undergirds improvement theory's power structures or, more broadly speaking, human exploitation of nonhuman nature.

Although I read the Creature as fluid, strictly defining him dates as far back as the novel's original publication in 1818. *The Literary Paranorma* released an anonymous review that year, remarking on the narrative's supposed inconsistencies and attempting to unravel its logic regarding the Creature. The reviewer writes:

> The author supposes that his hero has the power of communicating *life* to dead matter: but what has the vital principle to do with *habits*, and actions which are dependent on the moral will? If Frankenstein could have endowed his creature with the vital principle of a hundred or a thousand human beings, it would no more have been able *to walk* without previously acquiring the habit of doing so, than it would be to talk, or to reason, or to judge. (413-414, emphasis original)

The reviewer continues by noting the supposed absurdity of the Creature learning to read and understand the writings of Werter, Plutarch, and Volney within a single year. He

[25] Originally published in July 1814, three-and-a-half years before *Frankenstein*.
[26] Two versions were published in 1793 and 1795, respectively.

criticizes the Creature's mental development for being "full of these monstrous inconsistencies" (414). The reviewer is capable of suspending disbelief only as far as Victor's creation of life. However, he cannot accept that the creature could walk without first learning to do so. He assumes that a being with consciousness, and indeed a will, similar to those of humans must be like humans in every sense, revealing his view that the Creature must be neatly categorizable as either human or not-human, that he cannot be both. Arguably, the reviewer's repulsion at this supposed deformity, which is strikingly similar to Victor's own reaction, is precisely the novel's point.

Yet Shelley scholars also frequently enforce strict labelling by aligning the Creature with nature, reinforcing, perhaps inadvertently, the nature-culture dichotomy. Most notably, Mary Poovey argues that "Mary Shelley distrusts … the natural world" (126) and that "the Creature actualizes, externalizes, the pattern of nature—Frankenstein's nature and the natural world, now explicitly combined—with a power that destroys all society" (127). Anne K. Mellor sees the Creature as enacting Nature's revenge when he kills Victor's bride Elizabeth Lavenza on their wedding night (282). But the novel represents the Creature's correspondence with nature from *Victor's* perspective. Victor, as I demonstrate later, incessantly attempts to confine him to that category and in so doing render him conquerable. This illegitimate confinement begets the Creature's violent retaliation.

More recent scholarship continues linking the Creature with nature, but it also recognizes *Victor's* (human) connections with nature. For instance, Helena Feder writes that "from the incredible size and strength of the monster to the significance of his

articulations and Victor's irrational responses to his gaze, *Frankenstein* registers the human horror—the terror—of nonhuman nature's agency" (55). While Feder parallels the Creature and nature, using the phrase "*nonhuman* nature" implies that "nature" also comprises the human. Paul Outka references what he calls the "organic sublime" when an individual becomes keenly aware of "the radical material identity of his or her embodied self and the natural world" (31). Outka identifies the Creature's living presence as functioning in precisely this way. And he further explains that "since Darwin was right, we started to realize what we and nature always were—material, natural, artificial, made not found, always in flux, varied expressions of the same thing" (33). The Creature illuminates Victor's materiality and therefore his own kinship with nature.

Scholars have begun bridging the nature-culture gap by demonstrating the similarities between Victor and the Creature, and their mutual connections with the natural world. This chapter extends that work reading the Creature as indeterminate—at once nature *and* culture, or neither.[27] My ecogothic lens frames Victor's improvements of nature as the primary causes of isolation and (apparent) deformity; it reorients these consequences as environmental problems rooted in Victor's perceived detachment from nonhuman nature, something most readings ignore. This chapter focuses on four central

[27] Adjacently, critics have observed the Creature's boundary crossing in other ways. For example, despite the novel often gendering him as male, he often encapsulates the early-nineteenth-century *woman's* experiences. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that his narrative explores "what it feels like to be … a creature of the second sex" (235). Mary Poovey compares the monster to "a woman in patriarchal society—forced to be a symbol of (and vehicle for) someone else's desire, yet exposed (and exiled) as the deadly essence of passion itself" (128). Leila Silvana May stipulates that the monster "is the figure of the destructive power of suppressed feminine desire" (670). Although these scholars focus on gender rather than the nature-culture binary, their perspectives illustrate a broader concern: how the Creature cannot be concretely categorized.

portions of the novel to make this argument: Victor's childhood exploration of a lightning-struck tree, his creation of and horrified reaction to the Creature alongside the Creature's self-assessment, Victor's discovery of the Creature following his brother William's death, and his creation and destruction of the female monster. I begin by comparing Victor's presuppositions with William Gilpin's sketching manual, which serves as an exemplar of improvement theory. This comparison demonstrates how Victor himself echoes the early-nineteenth century improver. Considering both Victor's and the Creature's assessments of and reactions to the Creature's living presence, this chapter subsequently explores improvement's negative consequences and problematizes its ideological underpinnings. Finally, I consider how Victor's incessant failed attempts to further improve the living Creature and so reinforce a false dichotomy (nature-culture) exposes it as dangerous for both human and nonhuman nature.

Victor Frankenstein as Improver

William Gilpin, originator of the idea of the *picturesque* and author of travel narratives and sketching manuals, alongside biographies and religious tracts, was widely read during the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries. Although Shelley's journals never mention him, the overwhelming popularity of his work demonstrates that improvement discourses permeated Shelley's world. This section discusses how Victor Frankenstein embodies the improver by echoing Gilpin's writing on landscape sketching.

Gilpin's work celebrates the thoughtful artistic improvement of nature to inscribe picturesque scenes on canvas. And assuming a bifurcated view of nature and culture, he

articulates how sketchers should modify nature while masking, as much as possible, human influence. That is, although he fully encourages improvers' control over a space, the picturesque *result* ought to elide their presence:

> But whether I represent an *object*, or a *scene*, I hold myself at perfect liberty, in the first place, to dispose the *foreground* as I please; restrained only by the analogy of the country. I take up a tree here, and plant it there. I pare a knoll, or make an addition to it. I remove a piece of paling—a cottage—a wall—or any removable object, which I dislike. In short, I do not so much mean to exact a liberty of introducing what does not exist; as of making a few of those simple variations, of which all ground is easily susceptible, and which time itself indeed is continually making. (68, original emphasis).

Gilpin's instructions suggest that achieving the aesthetic ideal often requires human interventions—that is, human transcendence of nature. He assumes the idea that artists, or humans generally, manipulate nature while remaining ontologically distinct from it, noting particularly that artists are accomplishing what nature already does by "making a few of those simple variations … which time itself indeed is continually making." That is, Gilpin imagines artists as *mirroring* nature, not as functioning as a part of the natural process. And this mirroring serves a vital purpose as it hides the artist, or at least blurs the lines between artists' and nature's work.[28] Gilpin's dualism maintains a clear power structure that privileges the human, often at the expense of "nature," as artists work with "perfect liberty," as "[they] please," and remove any object "which [they] dislike." While

[28] Tangentially, Gilpin's assumptions work in contradistinction to Frederick Turner's idea of *nature naturing*. While Turner does not comment on Gilpin, his analysis demonstrates how Shakespeare, who obviously antedates Gilpin, suggests the opposing viewpoint that human modification of nature (specifically art) is itself a natural phenomenon.

Gilpin's language does not directly encourage nature's exploitation, his suppositions, which Victor Frankenstein takes to their extremes, do.

Victor's reliance on the nature-culture split, which his father reinforces, originates during his childhood. One particular experience stands out in Victor's memory as founding his perspective and eventually stimulating what would become his greatest and most terrible scientific achievement: the creation of a living being. At age fifteen, Victor asks his father to explain what causes lightning after witnessing it strike and incinerate an old oak tree outside the family home (Shelley 70). "When we visited it the next morning," Victor recounts, "we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbands of wood. I never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed. The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment." (70). Victor never expresses fear, and he never considers his own mortality, despite the lightning strike's close proximity to where he stood (only twenty yards were between them), but rather watches "with curiosity and delight" (70).

After probing the scene and asking his father for an explanation, the latter "[replies], 'Electricity'; describing at the same time the various effects of that power. He constructed a small electrical machine, and exhibited a few experiments; he made also a kite, with a wire and string, which drew down that fluid from the clouds" (70). Victor's father reaches beyond clarification and demonstrates two methods of harnessing the power that obliterated the tree (one quite like Benjamin Franklin's own kite experiment). In neither case does his ability to do so surprise Victor. Echoing Gilpin, Victor's father *removes* the natural threat that electricity usually poses. And comprehending,

subjugating, literally containing nature is the rule here, not the exception. We could interpret this subjugation and containment as improvement, which renders nature both benign and pleasing. Victor originally describes the natural process (lightning) as "utterly destructive" and, using the language he later employs to describe his monster, a "catastrophe." However, after his father's exhibition, Victor understands nature as something that humans can overpower and redirect for their own benefit, which the clear delineation between nature and culture supports. This understanding is Victor's primary delusion, which the Creature's existence later combats.

But until his Creature's awakening, Victor reenacts his father's improvement of nature by attempting bypass death. For instance, discovering "the elixir of life" (69), would allow him to "remove" nature's most critical "flaw:" death. Victor conjectures, "…if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (81). Overpowering nature—improving it—translates as Victor's literal ascent toward immortality. And his desire to renew life echoes Gilpin's assertion that artists should dispense with "any removeable object, which [they] dislike." However, Victor inverts Gilpin's contention that all artistic "variances" should correspond with those that "time itself is continually making" (Gilpin 68). Time is the precise natural phenomenon that Victor combats.

Richard Sha offers a helpful perspective concerning the role of the sketch as "imaginative taking," which in turn illuminates the relationship between Victor's Frankenstein's creative act and improvement:

> [S]ketching provides a seemingly nonthreatening material form for the containment of appropriating desires: no one is advocating *real* taking. Nonetheless, the pleasures of imaginative taking are real. By so blurring the boundaries between real and imaginative appropriation, this displacement attenuates and contains the potential violence of appropriation. (67)

Indeed, Gilpin's composition theory not only provides a model of imaginative taking, but also of human domination of the physical landscape. In the original sketch the artist creates a rough representation of the physical landscape and, once displaced from the original scene, recreates a sketch modeled after the original, altering and otherwise ornamenting it based on individual artistic preference and established aesthetic principles. The imagined landscape—that is, the artist's quasi-representation of the "real thing"—becomes a realm ripe for artistic possession and control, whereas the physical landscape lies outside the artist's grasp. The sketcher's aesthetic decision-making privileges her with degrees of power that she would otherwise lack.

Victor's creative decision-making reflects his "imaginative taking" of nature, exemplified by his desires to "animate" a body and deify himself. In most instances Victor speaks of "animation," instilling the principle of life into nonliving matter. Indeed, whenever Victor speaks of animating his creature, he most often refers to its materiality, for example, its extraordinary height, its potential to be physically "*like* [himself]" or "of simpler *organization*" (80 emphasis), and its makeup as "materials" and "lifeless matter" (80-81). Thus, his living creation carries the potential to fill the role of "picturesque object," malleable, moveable, and removable at his demand. However, on one occasion Victor dreams of becoming a "god" to a new species of living beings that would "bless" him as their "creator and source" (80). In such a case, his new species would require the

mental and volitional capacity to venerate *or* resist him, potentially risking his power over nature. In either case, Victor cannot actually possess or utterly control nature; he can only affect it in some way. Therefore, his creation act—his "improvement"—offers him only the kind of possession afforded the artist.

The Consequences of Improvement

While Victor's father reinforced the nature-culture dichotomy when Victor was a child, as an adult Victor acts on this "knowledge" in its extreme form when he creates a living being. Doing so, he attempts to "improve" nature by circumventing sex, or the "natural" reproductive process.[29] But his improvement backfires, exposing the nature-culture binary as untenable and (self)destructive. Indeed, it illuminates the idea that humans cannot alter nature without altering ourselves.

Unlike improved spaces, which intentionally mask design and labor to appear "natural," Shelley's novel features Victor's discovery and improvement processes. But it does so vaguely. Victor "[pursues] nature to her hiding places," and this work includes "[dabbling] among the unhallowed damps of the grave," "[torturing] the living animal," and "[collecting] bones from charnel houses" (81). But Victor offers no clear details concerning these tasks. The narrative does not hide the reality of design and labor, but neither does it precisely elucidate them. Inverting contemporaneous expectations in this manner allows the novel to focus attention on how improvement harms the improver

[29] Feminist scholars have commented on Victor's creation and female reproductivity, including Anne K. Mellor and Nancy Yousef, among others, commenting especially on how his creation (and destruction of the female monster) allows him to exclude women altogether.

(Victor). That is, it demonstrates that however humans modify the world around us, such modifications have consequences, whether for good or ill. And these consequences not only concern the objects we modify, but also ourselves, as the objects we modify (ostensibly improve) contextualize our daily experiences. In fact, rather than clarifying his improvement process, Victor expresses primary interest in how this process originates from and further provokes *his* mental degradation:

> My limbs now tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit. It was indeed but a passing trance, that only made me feel with renewed acuteness so soon as, the unnatural stimulus ceasing to operate, I had returned to my old habits. (81)

Victor narrates the memory of his discovery and creation processes as disorienting and causing seemingly involuntary bodily reactions. And he juxtaposes these mental and physical responses with descriptions of his former "almost frantic impulse," which allowed him to complete his work unrestrained by what repulses him while in his right mind.

The term "frantic" was used as early as the late-fourteenth century and through the nineteenth century to reference someone "affected by wild and ungovernable excitement," and it was often "applied as a term of reproach imputing extreme folly" ("frantic"). The term also often denoted insanity and, by the nineteenth century, someone who was "violently or ragingly mad" ("frantic"). Victor portrays his "frantic impulse" as an "unnatural stimulus," a phrase not only indicating physical or psychological abnormalities, but also implying someone "lacking normal human feelings or

sympathies," who is "excessively cruel or wicked" ("unnatural").[30] Victor suggests both meanings as escaping the "passing trance" enables him to "return to old habits," or normal life, and retrospectively feel horrified by his base behavior. By describing Victor's discovery and creation process this way, Shelley's novel writes improvement's genesis as an extreme psychological deformity, as the most unimaginable degree of insanity that provokes unspeakable violence toward nonhuman nature. The ecogothic lens helps us re-envision Victor's "deformity" as environmental at its core, as undermining improvement theory's inherent anthropocentricism. And this deformity extends well beyond Victor's behavior; it also isolates him and debilitates his awareness of the external world.

Victor both physically and mentally alienates himself from nature. While such alienation seemingly presupposes the dichotomy that I claim Shelley's novel rejects, Victor's narrative does not support that apparent contradiction. Rather, he highlights how *he* experiences the world around him, how *he* feels that nature is distant, though the text demonstrates that is not. Therefore, his alienation, which begins in the realm of his own imagination, is a symptom of deteriorating mental health. The novel explores this deterioration as a consequence of Victor's misapprehension of "nature" as distinct from himself. Focusing solely on his own sensory experiences, Victor's language associates

[30] Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, published the year after *Frankenstein*, uses "unnatural" in the latter sense when Rebecca claims, "What know I but that these evils are the messengers of Jehovah's wrath to the *unnatural child*, who thinks of a stranger's captivity before a parent's? who forgets the desolation of Judah, and looks upon the comeliness of a Gentile and a stranger?—But I will tear this folly from my heart, though every fibre bleed as I rend it away!" (317-318, emphasis added).

his distancing behavior (resulting from his wrongheaded view) with his waning mental health and awareness of the world around him:

> In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. (81)

This scene shows Victor enacting the nature-culture split by physically retaining himself within the built environment and further disconnecting himself from "nature." Yet he remembers his self-imposed isolation as a kind of imprisonment, referring to his workshop as a "cell," and he aligns it with his mental and physical deterioration as his "eyeballs were starting from their sockets." And his deterioration extends to what he later recognizes as his unawareness of nature.

> The summer months passed while I was thus engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit. It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest, or vines yield a more luxuriant vintage: but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time. (81)

Victor recognizes his diminished awareness of nature as "neglect," a failure that he correlates with "[forgetting]" the people who are dear to him. Paralleling nature and friends this way suggests his retrospective knowledge that he is more intimately connected with nature than he once thought. But his unacknowledged failure is his inability or unwillingness to recognize himself as part of nature. Even as he regrets his estrangement from nature in the above scene, he concentrates on the "most beautiful

season," "the charms of nature," and "scenes," signaling that he still sees nature as predominantly an aesthetic object, as Other. And his mentally disturbed states, both in this scene and as he narrates it, alongside his eventual demise (as well as that of most of his family), problematizes his objectification of nature and his self-distancing from it. Shelley's novel illuminates the discord between the fundamental assumption of improvement (the nature-culture binary) and the ironically devastating impact it has on the improver.

The narrative expands this criticism by also underscoring how Victor's improvement (again, by bypassing "natural" reproduction) results in a Creature whose identification as a natural or cultural artifact is indefinable. Further comparing Victor's work with Gilpin's both demonstrates why Victor views his creation as deformed and uncovers the novel's contention that the nature-culture binary is at best unstable. Richard Sha explains that for Gilpin, the sketch, appearing unfinished, provides a more accurate depiction of nature than a finished oil painting. Indeed, it "becomes a kind of portable inscription that bears the imprint and authority of nature herself" (Sha 56). For Gilpin the incomplete sketch reflects the mutability of nature and the completed oil painting inaccurately represents nature as static, perhaps even motionless. Further, the unfinished sketch is composed at the site using "a few rough strokes" (Gilpin 66). The artist uses this "original sketch" when "in the absence of nature" to produce an "adorned sketch," containing "a little ornament" and "a degree of corrections, and expression" (66-67). The artist acts in behalf of nature, resituating elements and altering terrain to form the picturesque from an original sketch, which functions merely to keep her "within proper

bounds" (67). Overruling nature, the artist represents the landscape as it *ought* to be, not as it is. She uses what nature got right and corrects nature's blunders to satisfy an aesthetic ideal, a god-like function, as Victor wishes his work to be. And remaining "within proper bounds" is precisely what renders the scene's final representation as "natural," even though the sketcher (improver) has judiciously altered it.

Although Victor mirrors this improvement discourse, the novel does not represent the result of his creation as appearing entirely "natural;" rather, it uses the Creature's *indeterminacy* to undermine this discourse. Whereas one of the central aims of improvement is to mask the boundary crossing that occurs between nature and culture, Victor's improvement exposes it, which he interprets as a deformity. He makes this conclusion immediately when the Creature awakens:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with the watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. (83)

This moment is entirely about Victor's emotional reaction. Indeed, he begins his description by emphasizing "[his] emotions." So, the novel represents it as *his* interpretation of the Creature, which informs readers more accurately about Victor than about what he is describing. And the central focus of Victor's upset at this "catastrophe" concerns the contrast between his intention to create a "beautiful" being and the result, the hideous "wretch." Whereas successful improvement elides modification—that is, it

appears “natural”—Victor’s efforts prove disastrous, as his creation only magnifies his human intervention, or rather interference, with natural processes. The Creature’s body exemplifies not harmony, nor the elision of improvement, but the competition between nature and culture. He appears “natural” in the sense that his body resembles the nonliving materials Victor modified, which he ostensibly collected from charnel houses. Indeed, the creature resembles a corpse with his thin, “yellow skin,” “dun white sockets,” a “shriveled complexion, and straight black lips.” But he also bears the markings of culture (Victor’s artifice), rendering the Creature as categorically indeterminate and therefore hideous.

While many scholars stop here and interpret the Creature as embodying nature, the following moment show how he might also embody culture. Indeed, far from seeing his Creature as natural, Victor explicitly expresses confusion about how he might “delineate the wretch” at all, and the novel highlights this confusion as its *central* (and initial) source of terror. Victor recounts:

> I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the court-yard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life. (84)

The Creature is both like and unlike humans. He has similar physical features, an expressive face, and the ability to speak. However, interrogating each major observable

human-like characteristic, Victor questions whether the Creature's physicality should really be compared to humans. He particularly questions "his eyes, *if* eyes they may be called" (emphasis added); he contends that his creation's vocalizations are nothing more than "inarticulate sounds," perhaps like what an animal might make; and his body resembles a corpse, which once was human but has since returned to the earth. In this moment, Victor identifies characteristics that concurrently seem human and other-than-human, and he unmistakably articulates bewilderment about what exactly he created, which renders his creation "wretched." Indeed, "No mortal could support the horror of that countenance … it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (84).

But not only does Victor view the Creature this way, the Creature cannot make sense of himself either. Readers will recall how after Victor and the villagers shunned him, he absconds to a hovel conjoining a small cottage where he observes the De Lacey family unseen. Here the Creature experiences "human" emotions as he increases compassion for his "friends," whom he had not yet met, and even seeks to lighten their burden by secretly collecting firewood for them. "When they were unhappy," he observes, "I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys" (129). Yet despite the apparent humanness of his experiences, when he first sees his reflection, his self-understanding becomes completely muddled and sparks his anguish. "I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers," he remembers, "their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool!" (130). The Creature ascribes grace, beauty, and delicateness to the De Laceys' physical

appearances, characteristics that reflect their personalities. However, his own reflection terrifies him as it appears utterly discordant with his previous "human" emotional responses to the De Lacey family:

> At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (130)

The Creature's physical image completely overshadows his "human" (cultural) traits: compassion, love, and the desire for friendship. He witnesses this conflict between his human-like qualities (culture) from his bodily appearance (nature) as a "miserable deformity." This disparity initially startles him, but it quickly leads him to despair, as this critical moment inspires a single conclusion, that perhaps he really is as monstrous as people think he is. Interestingly, the Creature accepts and rearticulates Victor's vision of beauty, identifying his materiality (nature) as the paragon of ugliness while further evincing his cultural assimilation—that is, he simultaneously manifests nature and culture.

Shortly after this experience, the Creature teaches himself to read, and his readings of Plutarch, Milton, and Goethe intensify his confusion about who and what he actually is. His self-examination in this moment is the most explicit expression of his indeterminacy. He remembers:

> As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I

> sympathized with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none, and related to none. (142)

Through observation (of the De Lacey family) and reading the Creature accumulates a large quantity of cultural knowledge. He recognizes the comparability of his own experiences with those of the people about whom he reads, but he has also developed enough analytical facility (itself a kind of cultural knowledge) to recognize his uniqueness. He "sympathized with" them, yes; but he also only "*partly* understood them." Indeed, he ultimately "related to none," and so he adopts Victor's perspective (aesthetic and even perhaps moral) when he finally admits his feelings:

> My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them. (142-143)

Like Victor, the Creature interprets his indeterminacy as a deformity. But he only makes this judgment after he amasses cultural knowledge. This fact suggests that his self-evaluation ("my person was hideous") is learned and, as such, is performative. Reading the Creature's articulations this way undermines their accuracy and reveals his "deformity" as socially constructed. By echoing Victor's characterizations, he begins forming his identity as the monster. Thus, Shelley writes the nature-culture binary as a cultural byproduct that is *not* representative of reality, but when treated as such is utterly devastating.

Victor's Re-improvement, Indeterminacy, and Shelley's Environmentalism

While the Creature's indeterminacy could be taken broadly to include aesthetics, gender, and morality, my argument focuses on the relationship between improvement and the nature-culture binary. The Creature's indeterminacy is the novel's principal point of terror because it confronts Victor's binary views of the world around him, unsettling the power structures that privilege the human at the expense of the nonhuman. It undermines Victor's delusions about nature as something distinct from himself, and therefore as something conquerable. But as the lines between himself and nature appear thinner, he must face the reality that his improvement of nature, which is grounded in an antagonistic relationship with it, has reciprocal and disastrous effects. Accepting indeterminacy as the rule—that is, rejecting his bifurcated view of the world—would positively reorient himself toward the Creature and produce happier outcomes for himself, his family, and the Creature.

However, rather than modifying his value system, which imagines the Creature as a monster and which the Creature consequently rehearses, Victor remains incapable of relinquishing his original role as improver. He continues attempting to overcome his failures by further improving the Creature, and in so doing escalates the Creature's violence. He pursues this task at almost every turn, but I will focus on two moments that represent the different means Victor employs to render his Creature more natural: when Victor objectifies the Creature and when he creates and destroys the female monster.

Victor attempts to neutralize the subversive Creature's power by objectifying him. For example, after returning home following his brother William's murder, Victor discovers the figure of the monster near him:

> I perceived in the gloom a *figure* which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightening illuminated *the object*, and discovered *its* shape plainly to me; *its* gigantic stature, and the *deformity* of *its* aspect, *more hideous than belongs to humanity*, instantly informed me that *it* was the wretch, the filthy daemon to whom I had given life. (99, emphasis added)

Echoing Gilpin's sketching manual, Victor offers a rough snapshot of the Creature, literally from a distant vantagepoint, and he corrects it to suit his desires. For instance, he ignores the Creature's human-like qualities and focuses entirely on his corporeality. He disregards the possibility that the Creature could experience complex emotions like love, compassion, anger, or resentment, which the novel reveals are part of his everyday experiences. And he concludes that the Creature's large size and deformed appearance, which render him "hideous," evidence his nonhumanness.

But since Victor considers the human a fitting point of contrast, he inadvertently exposes his suppressed awareness that he (the human) and the Creature share similarities. That is, if Victor's point were obvious, he would have no need to communicate it.[31] And he digs in his heels as he describes the Creature using only gender-neutral pronouns and references him as a "figure" and an "object." Since the monster does not embody the

[31] Alternatively, we could read Victor's juxtaposition of the Creature and the human as a lamentation. He intended the Creature for beauty and to resemble the human form but failed. His language could therefore stress the dissimilarity between his intentions (a beautiful, human-like being) and reality (a monster).

completeness of Victor's vision for him, objectifying him allows Victor to theoretically reduce the Creature to the "inferior" status of nature, which obscures his indeterminacy (his deformity), and reinstates Victor's dominance. Deploying Victor's continued improvement efforts, the text highlights that improvement implicitly reinforces existing power structures (in this case, the nature-culture binary), benefiting the improver by increasing his power.

However, the Creature's self-education, when we view it as improvement, complicates this argument. He learns about community, friendship, and love by watching the De Lacey family, and he teaches himself to read. Yet this improvement initially seems to backfire because it, alongside the Creature's consistent experiences of rejection, helps him develop his identity as a monster; it does *not* benefit him in any tangible way. These factors contribute to the notion that the novel questions every sort of improvement by exposing and criticizing the privileged access one needs to successfully accomplish it. The text supports this idea when the Creature's self-identification as a monster—that is, his realization that he has no place in human society—spurs his most important improvement effort, convincing Victor to create a female partner. "You must create a female for me," he argues to Victor, "with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse" (156). Of course, nothing within the Creature's power, but rather *Victor's* refusal, eventually incapacitates the Creature's self-improvement.

But after considerable debate, Victor originally consents to create a female partner, when the Creature offers to exile himself. "If you consent," he contends, "neither

you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America" (157). This self-exile would allow Victor to completely erase the idea of indeterminacy, the idea that confronts human dominance over the nonhuman world, by literally *removing* its embodied form, even as Gilpin suggests sketchers remove undesirous natural features.

However, when Victor has an apocalyptic vision, he is forced to confront the reality that he cannot modify "nature" without also modifying himself, or rather without incurring reciprocal actions. He now imagines his improvement of nature as utterly destructive.

> Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? (174)

Creating a female monster requires Victor to subjugate nature. But the frightening idea that Victor finally recognizes is that nature will in turn render *him* powerless. The very possibility of a "race of devils" exposes the nature-culture binary, as well as the hierarchy it assumes, as constructed. Victor cannot interact with nature without consequence because he (culture) *is* nature. But if nature and culture are not delineable, then the terms lose their significance and usefulness. If everything is nature, then nothing is. In our own time, *ecosystem* seems a more fitting term as it remains largely devoid of the metaphorical and often unclear valences of *nature*, and it appreciates the interdependence of humans and the other-than-human. But, preceding and during the nineteenth century,

nature was the commonplace term denoting "the phenomena of the physical world collectively; [especially] plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations" ("nature"). Shelley's novel deploys improvement to illustrate just how problematic this term is, alongside the hierarchy it implies.

Indeed, Victor's final rejection and destruction of the female monster precipitates the novel's tragic ending. "The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew" (174-175). Shelley never allows Victor to modify nature without repercussion, and in this instance, Victor appears cognizant that the monster, whom he now describes as a howling devil, will certainly seek "revenge." The novel questions the value of improvement because it reinforces exploitive power structures. Yet it also implies that some kinds of improvement may be beneficial, for instance the Creature's self-education and pursuit of happiness despite his circumstances. But as power structures remain intact, they undercut equitable access to improvement, meaning that marginalized Others (the Creature or nature) suffer. Still, Shelley's novel shows this suffering as challenging the very powers that cause it. Victor's work employs the nature-culture binary to impose his power. But the indeterminable monster demonstrates how this discourse Victor relies on promotes violence toward "nature" and is at its core self-destructive. The ecogothic lens foregrounds how Shelley's monster blurs conventional nature-culture paradigm, undermining binary that supports the exploitation of natural environments.

CHAPTER IV

JANE'S NATURE: IMPROVEMENT'S FAILURE IN *JANE EYRE*

> The first duty of an author is, I conceive, a faithful allegiance to Truth and Nature; his second, such a conscientious study of Art as shall enable him to interpret eloquently and effectively the oracles delivered by these two great deities.
> --Charlotte Brontë to W. S. Williams, 14 August 1848

Charlotte Brontë's instantly popular novel *Jane Eyre* echoes Mary Shelley's treatment of improvement. Resembling Shelley's monster, Jane's transgressive behavior and attitudes mark her as an object of improvement—correctable, moveable, and removeable. While this improvement enables her to successfully pursue a career as a governess, it fails her in other respects. Brontë's novel investigates this tension through its different manifestations of improvement—namely, plot gardens and picturesque landscapes—as well as through the unimproved natural environment—elfin forests, Lowood forest, and Ferndean. And this exploration directly entangles nature-culture and gender hierarchies. Indeed, gendered relationships often mirror the competition between nature and culture. For instance, the female personification of Nature permeated Victorian culture to the degree that Brontë's readers would have automatically recognized it. While female Nature usually succumbs to male conquest in both political and literary imagery, Brontë's novel transforms Nature into a force that guides Jane

toward maturity and a life as a writer—a "man's" occupation—and as an "equal" with her eventual husband Edward Rochester.

Adrian Tait contends that Jane's "conflation of 'women' and 'nature,' … suggests a form of essentialism that points to the patriarchal domination of both. Consequently," he continues, "it might be argued that Jane's faith in 'the universal mother, Nature,' is complicit with the very structures that oppress her" (38). Tate is referring to the episode at Whitcross where Jane was forced to sleep outside on the moor after having accidentally left her parcel on the coach that absconded her from Thornfield Hall. Here Jane describes Nature as "benign and good" (*Jane* 289). While this scene could lend itself to Tait's interpretation, a broader analysis of how the novel feminizes Nature reveals that Brontë's rendering directly conflicts with and, I argue, confronts convention. Indeed, while Tait aptly observes that the novel depicts Nature as both woman and mother, I add that Nature also embodies strength and female agency uninhibited by patriarchal systems of oppression, systems inscribed in improvement discourses. I argue that *Jane Eyre* interrogates these discourses by displaying "successful" improvements in competition with Victorian values, domesticity and virtue, and establishing their deficiencies, but also obliquely admitting that no viable alternative exists.

Contrasting the Lowood School plot garden with the unfettered female personification of Hope, I investigate how the novel undermines convention by exhibiting improvement's inadequacy and identifying "real" improvement as nonrestrictive. Subsequently, I consider how the Thornfield landscape represents the improved space as an extension of male power, which Jane imagines as a fallen "paradise." I conclude by

considering three unimproved locations: the elf-inhabited forests of Jane's childhood fantasies, the Lowood forest, and Ferndean. These places highlight Jane's desire to overthrow the constraints of improvement, but also cynically suggest that such an outcome is unlikely. Ultimately, the ecogothic lens focuses my argument on three key Gothic elements—transgression, deformity, and isolation—that magnify the novel's disputes with improvement discourses.

Domestic Improvement and Lowood's Plot Garden

Nineteenth-century English plot gardens were extensions of the domestic sphere. Eithne Henson reminds us that "the pastoral will suppress the reality of labour on the land, in gardens, in the farmhouse," and so "eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct books recommend gardening as a safe and suitable occupation for ladies … they serve, as Jacqueline Labbe observes, 'to enclose women, to render them properly domestic, properly encircled, properly 'genteel'" (7). Labbe further stresses that "the masculine privilege of ownership hovers above the feminine associations of the garden space, emphasizing the garden's potential for female limitation" (67). Superficially, the garden at Lowood School functions precisely this way. However, Brontë represents it subversively, at once emphasizing its capacity to make the girls "properly domestic" and also hinting that this domestic education is seriously deficient. Using the concept of deformity to combat Jane's ostensible childhood improvements at Lowood, and paralleling them with the school's plot garden, the novel interrogates the power

relationships (between nature and culture, man and woman) that improvement discourses enforce, and it celebrates boundlessness as an alternative.

When Jane first arrives at Lowood, she observes that "the garden was a wide inclosure [*sic*]" (46), immediately identifying it with the idea of containment or restriction. It "was surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect," limiting the girls' vision of a world of possibilities outside the school. She finally notes that "broad walks bordered a middle space divided into scores of little beds: these beds were assigned as gardens for the pupils to cultivate, and each bed had an owner" (46). Interestingly, these garden beds were not productive in any practical sense. Jane only ever observes flowers growing there. "When full of flowers," she observes, "they would doubtless look pretty; but now, at the latter end of January, all was wintry blight and brown decay" (46). While "wintry blight and brown decay" should be expected in January, this description, Jane's first account of the garden, is more than literal. From the start she associates the garden's productivity with disease, something she repeats more explicitly in the springtime. Moreover, Jane interprets flower decay negatively. Decomposition is an integral part of a garden's lifecycle; it supplies nutrients to the soil and supports plant health. Jane's negativity concerning this decay likely stems from how she aligns the plot garden with her own suppression. "Decay," which ultimately enhances garden productivity, implies the continuance of the garden space—that is, the space that reinforces the societal strictures the girls must endure.

Blight and decay parallel image of the Lowood girls' suffering and sickness. Jane recalls:

> I shuddered as I stood and looked round me: it was an inclement day for outdoor exercise; not positively rainy, but darkened by a drizzling yellow fog; all under foot was still soaking wet with the floods of yesterday. The stronger among the girls ran about and engaged in active games, but sundry pale and thin ones herded together for shelter and warmth in the verandah; and amongst these, as the dense mist penetrated to their shivering frames, I heard frequently the sound of a hollow cough. (46)

While environmental factors contribute to the girls' health problems, the school's authorities have insisted students stand out in the "inclement" weather, something that seems to be a common occurrence, especially since the girls heed the command, "To the garden," without skipping a beat and "[herd] together for shelter and warmth" like cattle (46). This scene deploys the garden to criticize women's domestic education. The narrative's central focus in connection with that education is suffering and little else, and this theme reverberates through almost every garden scene at Lowood School.

The critical moment when Jane makes a positive connection with the Lowood garden occurs only when female personification of Hope sparks *uncultivated* spring growth. Jane remembers how the girls "could now endure the play-hour passed in the garden," and that sometimes "it began to be pleasant and genial" (70). Hope "traversed [those brown beds] at night"—or secretly—"and left each morning brighter traces of her steps" (70). Jane's only positive thought about the garden involves her imaginative play where the female embodiment of Hope, who is not limited by the garden "inclosure," covertly offers the suffering girls relief from Lowood school's oppressive hand.

While Jane takes some pleasure in the "flowers [peeping] out amongst the leaves" (70), she ultimately associates them with death. As typhus was wreaking havoc through the school, she remembers:

> Its garden, too, glowed with flowers: hollyhocks had sprung up tall as trees, lilies had opened, tulips and roses were in bloom; the borders of the little beds were gay with pink thrift and crimson double-daisies; the sweetbriars gave out, morning and evening, their scent of spice and apples; *and these fragrant treasures were all useless for most of the inmates of Lowood, except to furnish now and then a handful of herbs and blossoms to put in a coffin*. (72, emphasis added)

Jane illustrates that the very things the girls produce, the flowers, are only suitable as images of death, literal and figurative. Although flower gardening did make the girls "properly domestic," as Ladde terms it, that domestic education backfires. Just as it destroys their agency, it could not save them from death. Lowood's improvements inadvertently threaten the very domestic realm they are intended to preserve. So, contrasting blossoming flowers with the dead girls is a jab at the patriarchal system that demanded the girls cultivate them in the first place.

The coffins symbolize nature's ultimate power over death. Alternatively, they illustrate improvement's incapability of ever truly overcoming nature (literally, the natural environment and figuratively, human nature). While Brocklehurst insists that "we are not to conform to nature" (60), with an implied double-meaning (human nature and biotic nature vis-à-vis Julia Severn's unkempt hair), nature takes the form of typhus and wreaks havoc through the school, infecting and killing over half the young girls. While the appearance of coffins should be expected in a scene describing these deaths, Jane explicitly connects them and the plot garden. Placing herbs and blossoms inside the girls'

coffins starkly contrasts the very things that made "the little beds … gay" with the lifeless bodies of "improved" children. These "fragrant treasures" might mask the odor of disease and death, as Jane previously mentions that Lowood's "rooms and passages steamed with hospital smells" (71). When the coffin lid closes, forever hidden will remain its contents: herbs and blossoms, which the girls produced as part of their domestic education, and the body of a dead child who that education could never save.

The Thornfield Landscape: A Fallen Paradise

The environments Jane encounters after leaving Lowood further illuminate Brontë' views about improvement. A notable example is when Jane seeks the Thornfield garden on a solo evening ramble and retreats into the orchard fearing observation from Rochester's library window. Considering the connections between Jane's mixed emotional reactions to this space and her anxiety about Rochester's gaze demonstrates the novel's criticism of the ways improved spaces reflect and impose hierarchical order. Rochester's pursuit and Jane's flight into the orchard, alongside her inability to effectively hide from the male presence there, illustrates how even those improved spaces she admires eventually fail her. Initially, Jane delights in the picturesque Thornfield landscape…until she becomes a part of it. When she describes the scene she focuses attention on the natural environment's apparently uncultivated aspects:

> It was now the sweetest hour of the twenty-four:--'Day its fervid fires had wasted,' and dew fell cool on panting plain and scorched summit. Where the sun had gone down in simple state—pure of the pomp of clouds—spread a solemn purple, burning with the light of red jewel and furnace flame at one point, on one hill-peak and extending high and wide, soft and still softer, over half heaven. The

> east had its own charm of fine, deep blue, and its own modest gem, a rising and solitary star: soon it would boast the moon; but she was yet beneath the horizon. (222-223)

Her adjectives carry gentle, unobtrusive connotations. Jane revels in the scene's simplicity, purity, solemnity, softness, charm, and modesty; and every element she characterizes this way is, or at least appears, distant and "natural." But she soon realizes that Rochester is likely watching her from his library, which jars her from this reverie. "I walked a while on the pavement," she recalls, "but a subtle, well-known scent—that of a cigar—stole from some window; I saw the library casement open a handbreath [*sic*]; I knew I might be watched thence; so I went apart into the orchard" (223). Jane's concern about observation indicates her awareness that someone else is witnessing her as an object embedded in the picturesque estate. That is, from Rochester's library-window vantagepoint, Jane metaphorically appears as an object ripe for improvement. The nonconforming Jane perhaps fears exposure since being observed, and therefore known, was dangerous during her tenure at Lowood. Her transgressions often inspired retaliation and forced re-assimilation, or repossession. And in this moment, she discovers that the same could be true at Thornfield Hall.

Evading Rochester's gaze in the orchard makes practical sense, but it also echoes Jane's unobserved childhood explorations of the woodlands outside the Lowood school enclosure. Yet quite unlike Lowood, Jane's joy in the orchard turns sour because the male presence encroaches and eventually invades this space. The orchard was "full of trees" like her childhood woods; indeed, "While such honey-dew fell, such silence reigned, such gloaming gathered," Jane notes, "I felt as if I could haunt such shade for ever"

(223). This language recalls how Jane has always felt about woods, envisioning them as spaces where her nonconformity can remain unthreatened.

Notably, Jane describes the orchard, an overtly improved space enclosed by trees and a "very high wall," as a paradise:

> No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. At the bottom was a sunk fence; its sole separation from lonely fields; a winding walk, bordered with laurels and terminating in a giant horse-chestnut, circled at the base by a seat, led down to the fence. Here one could wander unseen. (223)

Her assessment that this space is "Eden-like," seems surprising, as enclosed spaces like this one spurred her contempt as a child. However, the difference here lies with the sense that this enclosure, rather than enforcing her improvement, hides her temporarily from view. This passage carries the implication that she prizes this space because it masks her nonconformity, paralleling the biblical Eden, which hid Eve from Adam and permitted her to rebel against her patriarchal head and the masculine deity.[32] Whereas Gothic texts frequently render isolation in negative terms (for instance, the imprisoned Bertha Mason), here it seemingly competes with efforts toward Jane's improvement and supports her transgressiveness.

But these are no uncultivated woodlands; they are designed, constructed, and dominated by man, which suggests that something more is at work here. Henson iterates

[32] This view of Eden assumes the novel's underlying criticism of Christianity, which many of Brontë's contemporaries saw plainly. Furthermore, Brontë's sympathy with Christian Universalism—something she admits in one of her letters—supports her inclinations toward criticisms of more mainstream variations of Christianity and, therefore, to find the biblical Eden and what it represents problematic.

how Eden functions as "a convention of landscape description, related to the pastoral and is also frequently subverted: paradise will be lost, either because it belongs in the happier past, or because evil threatens it or has already entered it. These messages," Henson writes, "can safely be left implicit; readers are expected to absorb them without the need to spell them out" (7). When Rochester approaches, Jane's "step is stayed—not by sound, not by sight, but once more by a warning fragrance" (223). In this moment, she realizes she is not really isolated, not well-hidden, and not safe. "I must flee," she continues, "I make for the wicket leading to the shrubbery, and I see Mr. Rochester entering. I step aside into the ivy recess … and if I sit still he will never see me" (223). Jennifer D. Fuller argues that the Thornfield orchard "functions as a masculine equivalent to the garden. Instead of the female/flower, the male/tree is bound by walls and cultivated only for pleasure or profit" (158). Her point is well-taken, but as my previous section about plot gardens shows, improved spaces served other purposes as well. Furthermore, although young girls worked the Lowood the plot garden, Brocklehurst (a man) owned it. The novel represents *both* garden and tree, and indeed this entire picturesque estate, as masculine, as serving myriad purposes, and as especially enforcing (via improvement) the gender hierarchy, which the following section demonstrates as mirroring the nature-culture hierarchy.

Brontë is exploiting her readers' expectations using Eden imagery to imply subtler, and exceedingly transgressive, ideas against patriarchy. On the surface, describing the orchard as "Eden-like" foreshadows the emotional change Jane experiences in the following moment, from joy to terror. Thus, "paradise" is lost. Indeed,

while the novel demonstrates improvement's inadequacy at Lowood, here it renders the orchard as a fallen paradise. But that very description complicates the Lowood representation because it implies that improvement *could* create an ideal society and that its misuse makes it dangerous. The internal conflict Jane experiences once Rochester finds her clarified this point:

> I did not like to walk at this hour alone with Mr. Rochester in the shadowy orchard; but I could not find a reason to allege for leaving him. I followed with lagging step, and thoughts busily bent on discovering a means of extrication; but he himself looked so composed, and so grave also, I became ashamed of feeling any confusion: the evil—if evil existent or prospective there was—seemed to lie with me only; his mind was unconscious and quiet. (224)

Jane's reflection perhaps suggests that she feared how a solitary nighttime walk with Rochester "in the shadowy orchard" might negatively impact her reputation. She even kept him at a distance when she "followed with lagging step." We could read this scene as Rochester's misuse of the improved space. Its isolation, which moments earlier made Jane feel safe, enables him to inappropriately engage with her. And her austere childhood domestic education reverberates through her reflections as she confesses that any potential evil must originate with her own assumptions. Again drawing on the biblical narrative, Jane casts herself as the one wronging her employer. So the novel represents conventional improvement failing Jane as she now rehearses her childhood lessons. Doing so gives her leave to eventually give up "discovering any means of extrication" (she and Rochester enjoy a long conversation alone in the following moments) and so threatens her reputation.

Unimproved Spaces and Partnership as Fantasy

From the novel's beginning, unimproved spaces allow Jane to explore what life could be like without the constraints of her typical daily experiences. They offer her opportunity, even sometimes imaginatively, to transgress boundaries without recourse. This section considers three such places: distant elf-woods, Lowood forest, and Ferndean. While the elf-woods and Lowood forest enable Jane to enjoy the possibilities of an unfettered life, Jane settles into "reality" at Ferndean, a place where Nature converges with culture, which Jane's marriage to Rochester echoes, but this convergence is not altogether successful. Accentuating the deformities and isolation of the Ferndean house (the novel's final major symbol of culture) and of Rochester (the man who makes the most concerted effort to become equals with Jane), Ferndean demonstrates that the consequences of overthrowing conventional improvement are costly. Augmenting the mixed feelings explored in *Frankenstein*, Brontë's novel cynically considers whether mid-Victorians could or would ever actualize egalitarianism and whether complete overthrow is the correct response to the problems it associates with improvement.

While living at Gateshead Hall the child Jane makes a subtle correlation between improvement and environmental destruction when she laments over "the sad truth" that elves[33] "were all gone out of England to some savage country where the woods were wilder and thicker, and the populations more scant" (21). Her language suggests that primitive land (that is, unimproved land) has more abundant growth, as it is "wilder and thicker." As such, the "savage country," as opposed to the civilized or developed

[33] During one of their conversations Rochester also refers to Jane as an elf (280).

becomes the ideal habitat for her childhood fantasy. Jane seems quite aware of England's destructive relationship with the land. Elaine Freedgood recalls how Roman "imperial aggression" initiated Britain's deforestation, how the need for firewood and shipbuilding materials intensified it, and how enclosure put the nail in the proverbial coffin (38). Brontë herself lived and wrote during the final days of parliamentary supported "inclosure." Although the child Jane has limited knowledge about the destruction of woodlands, she seems to automatically associate their destruction with systemic control. As Robert Pogue Harrison observes, forests isolated and barricaded populations. They preserved local cultures and communities and protected them from invasion. Thus, forests became "obstacles—to conquest, hegemony, homogenization" (51), and their destruction with the inverse. Jane's sadness over deforestation hints that the actual savage country is the one she currently occupies, where power and nature compete, where the former thrives on the exploitation and destruction of the latter, as it had done for centuries.

Furthermore, the young Jane's idealization of forests is not without historical precedent, and it subtly informs us that she is aberrant and inclined to resist authority. In the years following the Norman conquest of England, many dispossessed English nobles who refused to become laborers or beggars elected to live and hunt illegally in the forests (Harrison 77). At this time, forests were heavily regulated, and violators of forest law were met with severe punishments, including enucleation and castration (Harrison 76). However, in the face of these cruel consequences these forest-dwelling English nobles used them as a bases to mount guerrilla attacks on the Normans, transforming

themselves, quite literally, into the stuff of legend. Since most of the English hated the Normans, they frequently sympathized with and celebrated these outlaws (Harrison 77). Legendary figures like Robin Hood, who appear in written record by the fourteenth century, embody not criminals, but, as Harrison puts it, "rebels challenging a law that had perpetrated injustices against them, hence as enemies not of the law but rather of its degradation" (Harrison 77).

Forests captivated the British imagination. They became spaces that harbored free-thinking vigilantes whom the powerful deemed enemies of the state. This image has been epitomized by Sir Walter Scott's famous rendering of Robin of Locksley in his 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*. Jane echoes this image during her brief fantasy about woodland elves, who cannot exist where the current power structures remain intact. The image of the forests, and eventually the literal woods around Lowood school, allow Jane to experience, imaginatively or in reality, a life beyond the reach of these power structures. The wild, thick forests of Jane's childhood fantasy are places she can "explore" and consider early in her development a life unbound, a life unencumbered by the improver's *destructive* hand (literally, referencing woodlands and metaphorically, her upbringing[34]).

Much like the forest-dwelling English nobles and the distant elves, Jane uses the uninhibited Lowood forest to investigate subversive modes of living, unrestrained by the

[34] This moment of my project enables some future expansion concerning Jane's childhood improvement at Gateshead Hall, her aunt Reed's punishments by isolating her inside the "haunted" red room, for instance. The terror of the haunted built space, with the kind of "improvements" Jane must endure, contrasts with her vision of the liberating, untrammeled forests.

school's usual rigid observation and control of the young girls. Jane remembers one pivotal spring when everything changed for her:

> April advanced to May: a bright serene May it was; days of blue sky, placid sunshine, and soft western or southern gales filled up its duration. And now vegetation matured with vigour; Lowood shook loose its tresses; it became all green, all flowery; its great elm, ash, and oak skeletons were restored to majestic life; woodland plants sprang up profusely in its recesses; unnumbered varieties of moss filled its hollows, and it made a strange ground-sunshine out of the wealth of its wild primrose plants: I have seen their pale gold gleam in overshadowed spots like scatterings of the sweetest lustre. All this I enjoyed often and fully, free, unwatched, and almost alone: for this unwonted liberty and pleasure there was a cause, to which it now becomes my task to advert. (71)

Here the novel represents the forest as female when it "shook loose its tresses," as other scholars including Henson have noted. This letting down of the hair is an important symbol that contrasts Brocklehurst's unbending control of the Lowood girls. In fact, this moment subtly recalls when Brocklehurst ordered that Julia Severn's hair be shorn. "I wish these girls to be the children of Grace," he rants, "and why that abundance? I have again and again intimated *that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly*. Miss Temple, that girl's hair must be *cut off entirely*" (60, emphasis added). In light of Brocklehurst's demands, the forest's exceedingly "immodest" act epitomizes Jane's own violation of gendered rules.

In the Lowood forest, Jane employs the gypsy trope to illustrate her violation of these conventional gendered strictures. Jane recalls, "But I, and the rest who continued well, enjoyed fully the beauties of the scene and season: they let us ramble in the wood, like gipsies [*sic*], from morning till night; we did what we liked, went where we liked,: we lived better too" (72). Abby Bardi articulates how writers usually treated gypsies as

"noble savages" who "were represented in literature as exotic, attractive, erotically charged free spirits whose traveling lifestyle was the subject of both envy and fear" (33). The novel certainly employs the gypsy trope in this way. For instance, Bardi observes that later in the narrative when Rochester poses as a gypsy woman, his "disguise permits a level of intimacy with Jane that would otherwise be denied him and which constitutes a sexual threat" (38). Rochester's masquerade as a gypsy woman is something Deborah Epstein Nord has astutely argued as an image that "[establishes] the *heroine's* exoticism and heterodox femininity" (195 emphasis original). Yet no one has further considered Jane's self-characterization as a gypsy child rambling through the woodlands.

Extending Bardi and Nord, I argue that Jane's self-characterization reveals her more explicit desire to subvert gendered expectations (this subversion implies her domestic education, her "improvement"), and much like the forest-dwelling noble outlaws after the Norman conquest, and embodying the elves her previous fantasy, she uses the forest as the site of this subversion. But this forest poses serious risks. Indeed, it is precisely "that forest-dell, where Lowood lay" that becomes "the cradle of fog and fog-bred pestilence" (71). Rampant forest-induced sickness and death is the only reason authorities gave Jane and the healthy girls "almost unlimited license" (71). We might interpret this disease as liberating the girls by either removing the watchful eye of school authorities or by killing them. In this sense, the forest—female and wild—appears as Jane's advocate. This rendering of Nature is something Nathaniel Hawthorne echoes a

few years later when he writes it as killing Alice Pyncheon.[35] However, this forest's danger might also intimate that Brontë holds mixed feeling about improvement. Her novel certainly criticizes it; but moments like these also demonstrate an absence of an adequate alternative to improvement. Either side has its problems, and Brontë does not attempt to resolve them in this instance.

If Lowood forest is a site where the child Jane could violate gender norms without reprisal, the isolated Ferndean is where the adult Jane experiences the most relief from patriarchal limitations, which were inscribed in improvement discourses. Whenever Jane experiences the positive effects of "isolation," its shortcomings also always emerge, whether in Lowood forest, Thornfield estate, or here. These environments enshroud seemingly liberating experiences, but this isolation also causes serious problems. I have already addressed Lowood and Thornfield; but Jane's residence at Ferndean both challenges *and* supports improvement. For example, its isolated location, on the fringes of society, enables Jane to take up the "masculine" role of a writer with no obvious objections from her husband. The woods signify that only protected by isolation can a family negotiate their relationship so transgressively. As Gilbert and Gubar put it:

> As a dramatic setting, moreover, Ferndean is notably stripped and asocial, so that the physical isolation of the lovers suggests their spiritual isolation in a world where such egalitarian marriages as theirs are rare, if not impossible. True minds, Charlotte Bronte seems to be saying, must withdraw into a remote forest, a wilderness even, in order to circumvent the strictures of a hierarchal society. (369)

[35] Hawthorne might not have read *Jane Eyre*, in which case, his echo could point to a broader transnational trend to represent Nature as a female personification that liberates oppressed women by killing them.

At Thornfield Hall, cultivated nature serves Rochester's inappropriate nighttime contact with Jane. But the unkept Ferndean woods mark a shift in his character, perhaps his "improvement," as well as movement toward a more egalitarian relationship with Jane. And its hidden location draws attention to societal anxieties about changing social hierarchies. As Gilbert and Gubar intimate, Ferndean is only accessible to people who have already rejected those hierarchies as destructive and unnecessary. Enid Duthie writes that Ferndean "is not another Eden" like the Thornfield orchard (143). Eden, as I mentioned earlier, maintains a hierarchical social structure and threatens Jane (Eve). Certainly, Jane and Rochester subvert that structure to some degree. Even the central imagery of Nature (the woods) subduing culture (the house) illustrates that this place rejects Victorian orthodoxies.[36] However, Ferndean both does and does not resemble Eden; it undermines convention in some ways, as I noted above, but rehearses it in other ways.

This tension becomes especially clear during Jane's conversation with Rochester, when she revises his self-characterization as the "lightning-struck horse-chestnut tree" in his Thornfield Orchard. He is referring to his injuries and his newfound weakness. But Jane objects when he likens himself to a cultivated, masculine tree. Rather, she sees him as one of her "wild" trees—like those distant trees she imagined as elven homes: those surrounding Lowood School, through which she romped as a "gypsy"-child; or those where they currently reside at Ferndean. "You are no ruin, sir," Jane asserts:

[36] Since "Nature" appears to be actively impacting the state of the house, suggesting its agency, I interpret it as subtly personified here, similar to how Jane personifies the Lowood forest.

> no lightning-struck chestnut tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop. (395-396)

Jane describes the vegetal growth around the tree roots as more or less wild; such growth is not pruned back or eradicated. Instead, it grows together with the tree. This imagery correlates Rochester's strength with his willingness to live alongside Jane, perhaps as equals. However, even though the wild growth remains *unimproved*, the tree (Rochester) still overshadows it. Indeed, Jane physically sits in Rochester's lap as she describes him as a safe prop. This imagery both competes with convention and relies on it.

Scholars have rightly criticized the nature of this renegotiated relationship,[37] particularly because "equality" only comes *after* Rochester's body has become permanently maimed—that is, "deformed." The only way he can successfully navigate a relationship with Jane now is through what seems a partnership. But whereas Rochester previously voiced that he and Jane were equals, and he may have been genuine in this assertion, at Ferndean this equality does not entirely exist. He depends on her at every turn because of his infirmities, and he does not recover some health until *after* they renegotiated their relationship. Jane also aligns Rochester with a wild tree, a symbol of strength, and a safe prop only *after* he becomes too physically weak to conquer her. Lastly, it is because of Rochester's infirmities that "he saw nature" through Jane's eyes, meaning he values nature in the way he appreciates Jane now. "And never did I weary of

[37] Scholars have long supported the idea that Rochester's maiming functions symbolically as castration, an idea that Richard Chase originated (495) and that Gilbert and Gubar support (368).

gazing for his behalf," she claims, "and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam—of the landscape before us; of the weather round us—and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye" (401). Perhaps, Rochester values the Ferndean woods only now because he cannot see them, except through mediation, and because they hide his physical infirmities from public view.

James Phillips contends that the physical isolation of Jane and Rochester's egalitarian marriage signifies the novel's political message, that "equality cannot survive without legal recognition" (203). But this isolation also bolsters the idea that Brontë was pessimistic about the probability of such a relationship, and therefore such legal recognition, ever occurring in reality. Indeed, Brontë's private letters express this pessimism explicitly. In a reply to Elizabeth Gaskell dated 27 August 1850, she expresses frustration concerning women's "condition" and reflects some aspects of this condition can never be changed:

> Men begin to regard the position of Women in another light than they used to do, and a few Men whose sympathies are fine and whose sense of justice is strong think and speak of it with a candor that commands my admiration. They say—however—and to a certain extent—truly—that the amelioration of our condition depends on ourselves. Certainly there are evils which our own efforts will best reach—but as certainly there are other evils—deep rooted in the foundations of the Social system—which no efforts of ours can touch—of which we cannot complain—of which it is advisable not too often to think. (Smith 173)

Brontë seems quite despondent. Making too great an attempt at changing women's social, economic, or political status—much less, thinking about this change—grieves her

because she recognizes its implausibility. And this implausibility also manifests in the interactions between the unimproved forest and the Ferndean house.[38]

Rather than depicting a partnership between the unimproved forest and the house, the novel represents Nature consuming the symbol of culture as a marked deformity. Jane recalls:

> Even when within a very short distance of the manor-house, you could see nothing of it, so thick and dark grew the timber of the gloomy wood about it. Iron gates between granite pillars showed me where to enter, and passing through them, I found myself at once in the twilight of close-ranked trees. There was a grass-grown track descending the forest aisle between hoar and knotty shafts and under branched arches. I followed it, expecting soon to reach the dwelling; but it stretched on and on, it wound far and farther: no sign of habitation or grounds was visible. (383)

Here Jane casts the woods themselves as a house, which conflates nature and culture. The trees are so densely packed that they seem like walls, the "branched arches" a ceiling, and the "grass-grown … forest aisle" a hallway. As the old domestic structure Thornfield Hall has burned to the ground, so the woods symbolize a newly rearranged domestic environment. However, the scene is gloomy, quite unlike the woods of Jane's childhood. Its "iron gates" and "granite pillars" are the only signs of human presence, but ancient wood significantly overshadows them. Jane continues:

> I thought I had taken a wrong direction and lost my way. The darkness of natural as well as of sylvan dusk gathered over me. I looked round in search of another road. There was none: all was interwoven stem, columnar trunk, dense summer foliage—no opening anywhere. (383)

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[38] Again, Jane's language regularly parallels Ferndean's natural scenery and her relationship with Rochester, which my analysis above demonstrates.

Unlike other moments of isolation in the novel, these woods make Jane feel unsure. They are depressing, even suffocating; both the dense growth and the seeming absence of a dwelling elicit these feelings.

But when Jane finally finds the house, "wild" nature eclipses it, unlike Thornfield Hall where the house overlooked the improved, picturesque landscape. Ferndean inverts the conventional order that the Thornfield estate exemplifies. But whereas the novel repeatedly criticizes improvement's inadequacies, it also explicitly showcases the negative consequences of rejecting it outright. Indeed, during Jane's twilight introduction to this place, she notices "the house—scarce, by this dim light, distinguishable from the trees; so dank and green were its decaying walls" (383). The unimproved place she describes not only seems undesirable, but also aligned with deformity. "Green" characterizes both healthy vegetal growth and unwholesome, sickening growth. Jane could imply both meanings, but given her emphasis on decay and dankness, the latter seems more likely. Nature is doing the house no service here; in fact, it slowly consumes it. Jane details the scene further:

> Entering a portal, fastened only by a latch, I stood amidst a space of enclosed ground, from which the wood swept away in a semicircle. There were no flowers, no garden-beds; only a broad gravel-walk girdling a grass-plat, and this set in the heavy frame of the forest. The house presented two pointed gables in its front; the windows were latticed and narrow: the front door was narrow too, one step led up to it. The whole looked, as the host of the Rochester Arms had said, "quite a desolate spot." It was as still as a church on a week-day: the pattering rain on the forest leaves was the only sound audible in its vicinage. (383)

The house, with its minimal security—a single latch—illustrates that while wild Nature usually supports female agency, by the novel's conclusion that fact no longer threatens

the *infirm* Rochester. Therefore, his settlement at the Ferndean house does not necessarily imply a transformed Rochester; instead, it could undermine that change altogether. Perhaps his transformation is genuine; perhaps not. Perhaps his anxiety about nature's/women's agency persists, but with no power to resist it anymore, he yields. In this scenario, Nature, through the Thornfield fire, has forced Rochester into submission. And so he confines himself within the material representation of Nature, Ferndean woods, deforming the symbol of culture, the house—and this image recurs later on in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Contrasting with Thornfield Hall, the Ferndean estate signifies skepticism about fully *rejecting* improvement. Meanwhile, the noticeable absence of a plot garden here reasserts the novel's initial *criticism* of improvement.

Ferndean's missing garden warranted Jane's mention because as a child gardens had been employed as a means of enforcing gendered limitations. She notices that "there were no flowers, no garden-beds; only a broad gravel-walk girdling a grass-plat, and this set in the heavy frame of the forest" (383). While Jane only passingly makes this observation, and while she gives much more narrative attention to the forest and to her evolving relationship with Rochester, the garden image symbolizes both her and Rochester's transformations, as well as indicates the novel's unsettled and even pessimistic viewpoint concerning improvement.

Of all the places Jane could have settled with her newly acquired fortune, this "desolate spot" (383) might seem an unlikely choice.[39] Here, unimproved Nature

[39] Jane's inheritance makes it possible for her to select other places to settle.

seemingly helps the couple with one hand and fails them with the other. It barricades her and Rochester from English society, which would have disapproved of the way they negotiated their relationship, but it also deforms the house. Yet we could read this conflict as reflecting how Victorians would have reviled the unkept, deformed estate, but also one that embodies Jane and Rochester's admixture of convention and nonconformity. And the novel never quite resolves these tensions. It combats improvement, yet it never offers an ideal alternative. Echoing Shelley's monster, Brontë's novel witnesses the collapse of nature and culture: the woods and the house (metaphorically Jane and Rochester). It also anticipates Hawthorne's representation of female Nature as an improver only a few years later.

CHAPTER V

NATURE AS IMPROVER IN *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*

> Without ignoring accomplishments, or casting a slur upon any of the graces which serve to adorn society, we must look deeper for the acquirements which serve to form our ideal of a perfect woman. The companion of man should be able thoroughly to sympathize with him – her intellect should be as well developed as his. We do not believe in the mental inequality of the sexes; we believe that the man and the woman have each a work to do, for which they are specially qualified, and in which they are called to excel. Though the work is not the same, it is equally noble, and demands an equal exercise of capacity. (*Godey's*)

Godey's Lady's Book was the most widely read American women's magazine during the nineteenth century. Among other features, it included fashion recommendations, sheet music, sewing patterns, recipes, as well as literature from some of the most celebrated American, mostly male, writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne. While the magazine favored women's education, as my epigraph exemplifies, it also idealized women's domestic improvement. T. Walter Hebert observes that the "true woman," the woman I refer to as ideally improved, "creates the 'home,' which offers a redemptive solace that counteracts the corruption and spiritual desolation of 'the world'" (68). But Alison Easton demonstrates that there was "a gap between lived experiences, and the bourgeois ideology of 'True Womanhood,' that is to say a pious, asexual, submissive domestic femininity" (80).

It is this gap, this tension, that Hawthorne investigates in *The House of the Seven Gables* by reversing the expected order and personifying (female) Nature as *culture's* improver. And gendered relationships mirror this Nature-culture competition, contiguously complicating the nature-culture and woman-man power structures. I agree with Nina Baym's contentious claim that Hawthorne sympathized with mid-nineteenth century feminism, and I contend that inverting the conventional nature-culture and gender hierarchies, *The House of the Seven Gables* deploys female Nature as an improver, both to illuminate improvement ideology's unsustainability and to favor partnership.

I begin by treating Nature's improvements of three cultural symbols: the Pyncheon house, the garden, and Maule's well. While these improvements are nearly always gendered and often result in deformity, I explore how the narrative celebrates Nature's improvement of the toxic well—the symbol of man's violation of nature—and criticizes improvement discourses. Subsequently, I investigate how Nature improves the wild Alice Pyncheon, liberating her from the consequences of Matthew Maule's possession (*his* hyperbolic "improvement") through death. I conclude by exploring Phoebe and Holgrave's sometimes conflicted relationship renegotiation, which mirrors Nature's final partnership with the Pyncheon house, and ultimately extends criticism of divisive binaries which uphold the idea of improvement.

Nature as Improver

Hawthorne personifies Nature as an embodiment of reinvented womanhood, at once maternal, unpredictable, and resistant to normative sexual divisions. Nature serves

as the image of women's ever-expanding spheres of influence, inside and outside the home. The narrative often renders this reimagined woman as a haunting figure, literally threatening the physical home with her "improvements" at every turn. Nature represents quite a different kind of woman than Phoebe Pyncheon or than *Godey's Lady's Book*'s celebrated ideal woman. This divergence makes her often terrifying, like Mary Shelley's monster, and characters nearly always see the results of her modifications as deformities. In the following section, I discuss how female Nature attempts to improve three symbols of culture: the Pyncheon house, the garden, and Maule's well. These interactions, or rather how characters perceive them, highlight the novel's critique of improvement ideology's reliance on the conflict between nature and culture, which intersects with its questioning of the cult of domesticity.

The novel's exposition depicts Nature as female, maternal, and attempting to improve the Pyncheon house, mirroring the narrator's suggested sympathy with her. The narrator comments that "it was both sad and sweet to observe how Nature adopted to herself this desolate, decaying, gusty, rusty, old house of the Pyncheon family; and how the ever-returning Summer did *her* best to gladden it with tender beauty, and grew melancholy in the effort" (*Seven Gables* 22). He genders Nature and Summer, deploying an age-old correlation between women and nature. Feminist scholars[40] have often noted how this correlation, which appears repeatedly in Western culture, has underscored the idea of women's and nature's inferiority to men. It suggests that both are objects for men to conquer and control.

[40] See Annette Kolodny.

Furthermore, nineteenth century American texts frequently represent Nature and culture as competing, yet Hawthorne initially envisions Nature struggling to develop a familial relationship with the cultural symbol. She appears maternal, attempting, albeit failing, at gladdening and beautifying her "adopted" house. And the narrator intimates that he sympathizes with her—"it was both sad and sweet,"—that he wishes she would succeed. But her improvements deform the house; indeed, Nature appears to be consuming and destroying the house, magnifying its aged and desolate aspect rather than tangibly benefiting it. And the house seems overrun with an abundance of burdocks (weeds) and garden weeds, *rooftop* posies (which until the novel's ending are considered weeds), and the green moss growing on the "projections of the windows, and on the slopes of the roof" (22). And generations of this vegetal growth directly on the house itself almost certainly caused the house's physical decline. Yet the narrator never uses language that suggests *he* sees her work as harmful. Instead, he observes how the Pyncheon elm tree "gave beauty to the old edifice, and seemed to make it a part of nature" (22).[41] From the beginning the novel suggest a desire for Nature's improvement of this important domestic symbol to succeed, and the narrator expresses disappointment when she fails.

Perhaps her wildness precipitates this failed motherhood. She appears as a transgressive female figure who, despite her best intentions, effectively destroys the

[41] This attempted partnership foreshadows the eventual partnership of Maule and Pyncheon through the marriage of Holgrave and Phoebe. Holgrave is regularly seen working in nature; he even tends "plebian vegatables." Meanwhile, Phoebe, who tends "aristocratic flowers" seems the model of culture. The tension between Nature and house even remains until Holgrave professes he love for Phoebe. And so, Nature claims "sisterhood"—that is, a familial *partnership*—with the house (a point I discuss in detail later).

domestic structure. The narrator's sympathy with this failure suggests awareness of and cynicism toward a larger societal issue. Rather than embodying the (improved) domestic ideal and making the home from the inside out, Nature inverts the conventional order and seeks to transform the domestic (structure) from the outside in. But her failure at this point in the narrative, alongside the narrator's sympathy, suggests Hawthorne's frustration with contemporaneous Americans' resistance toward women's changing roles. And the overlaying of the gender hierarchy and the nature-culture binary also implies the author's complaint about Americans' combative relationship with nature. The narrative reimagines humans (culture) as *nature's* object, and renders this inversion too as deformed, but sadly so.

Much as Nature collides with the Pyncheon house, it also wrangles with culture in her attempt to improve the Pyncheon family's small garden. However, Rita Bode, the only other scholar to offer an ecocritical reading of Hawthorne's novel, argues that the Pyncheon garden "is remarkably eclectic creating numerous mediating spaces between nature and culture" (43). Indeed, the gardeners, Phoebe and Holgrave, embody this mediation. Bode asserts that "with her country background, [Phoebe] seems to be a child of nature" (43). Meanwhile, "Holgrave, who supplies her with the books, seems too much a figure of culture" (43). And their collaborative efforts to cultivate the garden reflect the species, class, and gender inclusivity that Hawthorne vied for (42).

While the garden does appear as Hawthorne's site of mediation, I contend that the continued presence of mediators both requires and perpetuates the binaries the garden supposedly blurs. Ecocritics generally accept that the nature-culture split is a human

construct, one that the patriarchal West has especially authorized. It follows then that continued negotiation between the two fails to see culture as part of nature, and so it promotes, even if inadvertently, culture's privileged status. Therefore, the Pyncheon garden, as a site of such negotiation, actually illustrates doomed attempts at achieving (species, gender, and class) inclusivity. Gardens often showcase the discourses Americans obsessed and argued over, but they never illustrate harmony. Furthermore, Hawthorne nearly always uses gardens not as sites of harmony, but places of conflict.

For example, in 1844 Hawthorne first published "Rappaccini's Daughter," which features a toxic garden that helps the author explore tensions concerning nature and culture, gender, and class, much as he does with the Pyncheon garden. The short story tells the tale of the young Beatrice, daughter of the scientist Giacomo Rappaccini. Giacomo raises Beatrice amid a garden of poisonous plants, and he directs her to tend the flowers there. I argue that the setting and Giacomo's directive align toxicity with conventional domestic arrangements, which the cult of domesticity lauded, and which the properly "improved" garden symbolizes. The narrative shows the results of Beatrice's forced isolation within the domestic boundaries of the garden. And a childhood spent with her "sister" flowers immunizes Beatrice and makes her poisonous ("Rappaccini's" 980); any living thing—human and nonhuman animals, or plants—that entered the garden becomes toxic and eventually dies. When her suitor, Giovanni Guasconti, becomes poisoned by his contact with Beatrice and the flowers, his mentor (and Giacomo's enemy) Pietro Baglioni offers him an antidote, secretly poison, which

ultimately kills Beatrice. The garden therefore becomes a place where domestic suffering presents itself as a reaction to the excesses of male power.

Most critically it connects improvement with near obsessive control of women and nature, and it represents its results as fatal. Even as the domestic garden nurtures deadly flowers, it exposes conventional domestic arrangements as dangerous for women. For instance, the narrative parallels the garden, which was "cultivated with exceeding care," and Beatrice, who "looked redundant with life, health, and energy" (979); and it juxtaposes them with Giacomo's "tall, emaciated, sallow, and sickly-looking" aspect, with his lifelong inability to "[express] much warmth of heart" (978), and ultimately with Beatrice's untimely death. This garden-death connection resurfaces a few years later with Charlotte Brontë's publication of *Jane Eyre*.

Like "Rappaccini's Daughter," *Seven Gables* uses the garden to highlight competition. For instance, Holgrave rehearses gender expectations when he turns flower cultivation over to Phoebe while he continues working the vegetables. Rather than celebrating collaboration, this labor distribution is at once sexist and classist. The narrative is explicit elsewhere on this point, calling flower cultivation a "lady-like employment" (Hawthorne 64) and moments later observing that "Phoebe found an unexpected charm in this little nook of grass, and foliage, and *aristocratic flowers* and *plebeian vegetables*" (Hawthorne 65, emphasis added). She takes upon herself aristocratic, "women's" work, which concerned itself almost exclusively with aesthetic pleasure; meanwhile, Holgrave continues his "plebian" efforts at cultivating vegetal sustenance. Holgrave's and Phoebe's gardening improvements perpetuate gender and

class norms. Inversely, they imply anxiety about uncultivated (wild) Nature, which symbolizes contemporary worries about how women's changing roles might adversely affect the family and class distinctions. The garden itself never achieves harmony or inclusivity while humans are present. Instead, it primarily functions as a space that affirms binaries.

This affirmation could support the claim that *Seven Gables* assents to the divisive values of the ideal domestic woman. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, for example, argues that the novel is styled after the domestic novel and that scholars should read it as such. She observes that the novel "resembles this popular genre in its plot, characters, setting, and imagery" and that the narrative "embodies the primary ideology of the cult of domesticity: the value of love and human relationships as opposed to materialism and self-centeredness" (Gallagher 4-5). She identifies Phoebe as the novel's heroine, "whose domestic abilities bring success" (Gallagher 5). These domestic abilities include "caring for poultry, running a cent-shop, baking mouth-watering cornbread, and brewing ginger beer" (Gallagher 5). While Gallagher's interpretation of Phoebe certainly supports my reading of the Pyncheon garden as a space that enforces binaries, her analysis oversimplifies Phoebe's role.

Kelly Masterson offers a more nuanced reading of Phoebe, demonstrating how she models "the ideally educated modern young woman … that successfully merges capitalist values with domesticity" (192). Phoebe's work as a "saleswoman" in Hepzibah's cent-shop, which was located within the Pyncheon house, "adapted values prized in the public sphere for use in the domestic space" (Masterson 193). Masterson

finally argues that "Hawthorne sought to contain women's roles within the domestic space by merging the discourses and values of the marketplace with principles of women's domestic education and ultimately foreclosing the possibility of a sustained application of those skills in the public sphere" (193). And Hawthorne, she urges, most clearly exemplifies this foreclosure in Phoebe's "[restriction] to the domestic space throughout the novel" (Masterson 194).

Admittedly, Phoebe's life and labor seems bound to the domestic space. However, Gallagher and Masterson's interpretations misjudge with *whom* the narrator's primary interest rests. While the domestic Phoebe is a pivotal character, Nina Baym makes a compelling case for Hepzibah as the novel's true heroine. She astutely observes that the narrator himself introduces Hepzibah as "our heroine," admitting that some scholars have interpreted that phrase ironically. She further highlights how the narrator focuses on Hepzibah for the first four chapters and argues that Hepzibah is the only character who directly opposes the antagonist Jaffrey Pyncheon, which ultimately precipitates the plot's resolution (involving Jaffrey's death; Hepzibah, Clifford, Phoebe, and Holgrave's move to the country; the dissolution of the ancient Pyncheon family curse; and the reconciliation and union of Maule and Pyncheon) (Baym 608).

Extending Baym, I argue that with Hepzibah as "our heroine," Phoebe's representation as a domestic woman no longer presupposes Hawthorne's final interests in "[containing] women's roles within the domestic space." Indeed, Hepzibah's dissolution of the family curse when she confronts the family's male heir underscores Hawthorne's criticism of women's limitations. That is, a woman's agency brought about the Pyncheon

and Maule family's ultimate happiness. Furthermore, I argue that Nature's improvements in the garden, which sometimes manifest as discord or competition, reflect Americans' varied and often negative feelings about the ever-evolving domestic and public spheres.

The narrator's descriptions of Nature competing for space in the Pyncheon garden further illustrates this point. In fact, the more invasive and transgressive Nature becomes, the more men resist her. The garden weeds, which the narrative subtly genders, violate this domestic space, and Holgrave fastidiously keeps them at bay, as Phoebe observes when she first strays into the garden:

> The black, rich soil had fed itself with the decay of a long period of time; such as fallen leaves, the petals of flowers, and the stalks of seed-vessels of vagrant and lawless plants, more useful after their death, than ever while flaunting in the sun. The evil of these departed years would naturally have sprung up again, in such rank weeds (symbolic of the transmitted vices of society) as are always prone to root themselves about human dwellings. Phoebe saw, however, that their growth must have been checked by a degree of careful labor, bestowed daily and systematically on the garden. (63-64)

"Fallen leaves" suggest that the garden remains in a postlapsarian state, an idea subsequently supported by the narrator's correlation between weeds and "transmitted vices of society." Nature's presence, therefore, accentuates the biblical symbolism Hawthorne employs. Mirroring Jane's assessment of the Thornfield orchard as "Eden-like" in *Jane Eyre*, the *Seven Gables*'s narrator implies the same biblical connection. The Pyncheon garden is a fallen "paradise" where the wild and domestic, nature and culture, clash.

Extending the Edenic imagery, the "petals of flowers," listed among the dead materials that feed the soil, recall the fallen woman trope. Indeed, in the nineteenth

century, flowers frequently symbolized women. And Hawthorne himself journals about his wife Sophia, describing her as pure like a "pond-lily" and remarking, "I possess such a human and heavenly lily" ("Ordinary Mysteries" 15), a comment that he deleted from his published "Note-books" (Hawthorne, "Passages" 41).[42] His comment as well as its subsequent deletion suggests that Hawthorne's perspectives on women were complicated. The novel's narrator supports this woman-flower connection throughout the novel, for instance calling flower cultivation a "lady-like employment" (64), and noting how Holgrave "[turns] over [the garden] flowers … to [Phoebe's] care," a responsibility she accepts unreservedly. Additionally, the novel surrounds the two young female characters with floral imagery. Phoebe is the "garden-rose" who purifies her bed chamber with Alice's white roses (34-35). During her lifetime, Alice "bestowed her maiden leisure to *flowers* and music" (137), and after her death, family members and neighbors always remember her because of her rooftop posies.[43] And in the Pyncheon garden, transgressive female plant deaths (or, Nature's death) enrich the soil's microecology, figuratively safeguarding traditional domestic values. Alternatively, we could read this moment as signifying Nature's successful improvement of the garden through her death.

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[42] Hawthorne serialized many of his journal entries for his "American Note-books of Nathaniel Hawthorne," published in *The Atlantic Monthly Advertiser* in 1866. The following is the excerpt from the July issue, which omitted reference to Sophia:

> It is a marvel whence it derives its loveliness and perfume, sprouting as it does from the black mud over which the river sleeps, and from which the yellow lily likewise draws its unclean life and noisome odor. So it is with many people in this world: the same soil and circumstances may produce the good and beautiful, and the wicked and ugly. Some have the faculty of assimilating to themselves only what is evil, and so they become as noisome as the yellow water-lily. Some assimilate none but good influences, and their emblem is the fragrant and spotless pond-lily, whose very breath is a blessing to all the region round about. … (Hawthorne, "Passages" 41).

[43] In "Rappaccini's Daughter," after watching Beatrice tend her "sister" flowering plant, Giovanni "[dreams] of a rich flower and beautiful girl" (980).

Perhaps the most explicit reaction to Nature's modifications occurs when the narrator describes the "stalks of seed-vessels of vagrant and lawless plants." He is referring to the small stalks that uphold a plant's ovaries, clearly analogizing women's reproductivity. While their deaths benefit the soil, since these plants are Nature's manifestations—they are all "rank weeds"—they threaten the domestic garden space. They accomplish this task by "flaunting" their bodies to wood-be pollinators, rampantly reproducing, and then "[rooting] themselves about human dwellings." But a man, Holgrave, keeps them in check. Nature's improvements, which manifest as deformity time and again—this passage included—perhaps contend with the very idea of improvement altogether. By inverting the conventional (nature-culture) order, improvement's destructiveness becomes obvious.

However, there is one improvement which the novel explicitly celebrates. Previously the narrator expresses both sympathy and anxiety about Nature; but later, using free indirect discourse to describe Phoebe's reactions to the garden, he witnesses what must be divine satisfaction with Nature's presence in the garden, observing how "the eye of Heaven seemed to look down into it, pleasantly, and with a peculiar smile; as if glad to perceive that Nature, elsewhere too overwhelmed, and driven out of the dusty town, had here been able to retain a breathing-place" (65). Hawthorne juxtaposes the dusty town with Nature, locating problematic behavior in the public sphere. It is perhaps surprising that Nature, which the novel repeatedly characterizes as wild, finds refuge within a domestic enclosure. However, while the "dusty town" has ejected Nature entirely, she maintains *dominion* over parts of the garden.

After depicting a pair of nesting robins, the celebrating the plentiful bees, Hawthorne explicitly symbolizes Nature's mastery:

> There was one … object in the garden which Nature might fairly claim as her inalienable property, in spite of whatever man could do to render it his own. This was a fountain, set round with a rim of old, mossy stones, and paved, in its bed, with what appeared to be a sort of mosaic-work of variously colored pebbles. The play and slight agitation of the water, in its upward gush, wrought magically with these variegated pebbles, and made a continually shifting apparition of quaint figures, vanishing too suddenly to be definable. Thence, swelling over the rim of moss-grown stones, the water stole away under the fence, through what we regret to call a gutter, rather than a channel. (65)

This passage describes Nature possessing an important symbol of culture, the fountain. It also reinforces the idea that man—and here we should note the gendered language—continuously resists her but fails. The narrator vindicates Nature's success and suggests criticism of man attempting to take siege of Nature's "inalienable property." The fountain, as Phoebe soon learns, is Maule's well, which is not only a central garden feature, but also a recurring motif, signifying Nature's retaliation against *man's* violation of her.

This retaliation becomes apparent when we read it alongside the novel's backstory. During the period of the Salem Witch Trials, and resulting from Colonel Pyncheon's machinations, Matthew Maule was executed for purportedly practicing witchcraft. Colonel Pyncheon orchestrated Maule's death so that he might build his stately home on Maule's land, effectively transforming Maule's productive homestead into the Pyncheon family's status symbol. Colonel Pyncheon's land appropriation and murder of the land's "native" occupant parallels colonial Americans' incessant land

acquisition through the expulsion of Native Americans. Nature herself blatantly revolts against Colonel Pyncheon, making the once pristine well "hard and brackish" and "productive of intestinal mischief to those who quench their thirst there" (9). Even Holgrave later warns Phoebe against drinking the well water "because, like an old lady's cup of tea, it is water bewitched!" (69). Responding to man's misdeeds, Nature threatens the health of anyone who misuses her—that is, anyone who drinks at *her* well. Not only has she taken possession of the well, but deploying weeds, birds, bees, and moss, she asserts dominance over the whole estate: both garden and house. Ultimately, the Nature-owned and bewitched well embodies Hawthorne's characteristically cynical interpretation of America's past.

Although the well symbolizes Colonel Pyncheon's deceit and violence, Nature herself retains power over this symbol. This striking power relationship reverses convention. Here, the female figure appears dominant and terrifies the patriarchal order with her capacity to expose its misdeeds. Drinking at the well, which induces intestinal problems, always recalls the moment the water turned bad, when one elite man exploited Nature and her native occupant. The narrator certainly makes this connection during the novel's exposition, and Holgrave implies it when he describes the water as "bewitched." But ultimately, Phoebe embraces Nature's power over this symbol, which conflicts with how scholars usually render her, as utterly fulfilling the domestic ideal. This moment at least implies that she questions that ideal.

Meanwhile, Holgrave checks Nature, and, subsequently, Phoebe. During their first meeting in the garden he tells her, "I dig, and hoe, and weed, in this black old earth,

for the sake of refreshing myself with what little nature and simplicity may be left in it, after men have so long sown and reaped here (66). Holgrave desires nature's presence. And like the narrator, the weeds are problematic, but only as a point of practicality; weeds can and do harm other plants he wants to grow. And his gendered language is important here. While "man" conventionally refers to humanity, the plural, "men," intimates a criticism that men, specifically, have overworked the land and depleted its nutrient value. By implication, therefore, this moment more broadly questions America's ongoing expansionist economy, which the novel's Puritan era backstory also supports.

Despite Holgrave's implied criticism, he still suggests discomfort with some manifestations of nature. Though he had previously tended the flowers, he did so only out of seeming necessity, for at his first opportunity, he tasks a woman with flower cultivation. His discomfort with flower gardening may be read as agitation over completing "women's work." Furthermore, his insistence upon a traditional sexual labor-division means that he is claiming possession of the garden and its inhabitants, just as his ancestor took possession of Phoebe's.

Nature and Alice Pyncheon

Holgrave and Phoebe's relationship parallels that of their respective ancestors: Matthew Maule (grandson of the wrongfully executed "wizard") and Alice Pyncheon. During a visit in the Pyncheon garden, Holgrave reads one of his own short stories, which details the events that supposedly led to Alice's death. Interestingly, Holgrave intends to submit his narrative to *Graham Magazine* or *Godey's Lady's Book* for publication, a

narrative that explores how Nature's improvements save the young Alice from the long-term consequences of the most extreme and destructive manifestations of male dominance, Maule's destructive improvements of Alice. Ultimately, Nature retaliates by liberating Alice and punishing the men who subjugated her. But when Holgrave's reading induces Phoebe's trance-like drowsiness, he realizes that his "poor story, it is but too evident, will never do for Godey or Graham!" (151). Indeed, given the story's subversive commentary, Holgrave's suspicion is likely warranted; his tale really might not appeal to *Graham* or *Godey*'s audiences. In the ecogothic reading that follows, I demonstrate how Holgrave's narrative surprisingly represents Nature as both liberating Alice from the suffering caused by male power and as punishing the man who possessed her. I subsequently identify how Holgrave's vindication of Nature's "terrorization" underscores how he is evolving, as well as underscores how improvement ideology, which supported women's domesticity, fails. In this way, Hawthorne's text recalls the failures of *Jane Eyre*'s plot gardens.

Notably, Holgrave's narrative initially highlights the desirability of the ideal domestic woman, aligning Alice, like Phoebe, with flowers. "The fair Alice bestowed most of her maiden leisure between flowers and music," he says, offering an image of a young woman fulfilling her domestic expectations. But doing so dissatisfies her, as "the [flowers] were apt to droop, and the melodies were often sad" (137). Both in the novel itself and in this cultural moment, flowers nearly always signify objects of male possession. Phoebe tends flowers at a man's behest, a man who remembers Phoebe's predecessor as a flower that two other men, her father and Maule, incessantly

control. The narrator highlights how fulfilling her societal expectations causes Alice to wither on the stalk, as it were, exposing how domestic isolation (literally and figuratively) negatively impacts women's health and happiness. But since Maule desired revenge against the Pyncheons, he uses his mesmeric powers to punish them by obliterating Alice's image as an ideal domestic woman (flower).

When Maule ensnares Alice, placing her in a trance, he transforms her from a cultivated flower into an abhorrent embodiment of wild Nature.[44] With but a wave of his hand, even from some distance, "her spirit passed from beneath her own control, and bowed itself to Maule" (149). And often at his command she would break into "*wild* laughter"; weep uncontrollably, quenching all the mirth of those around her *like sudden rain* upon a bonfire"; or perform a dance "befitting the brisk lasses at a rustic merry-making," all at the most inappropriate times (149, emphasis added). Moreover, whereas the narrator formerly described her using floral imagery, now he characterizes her "hysteria" as a manifestation of Nature competing with culture, or "sudden rain upon a bonfire." And her outbursts always occur within built environments (a chamber or church) or when performing some expected duty (praying or entertaining her father's guests). Similar to Nature's interactions with the Pyncheon house and garden, Holgrave renders Alice as undermining domestic expectations and even as an embodiment of Nature. Alice becomes a "[scorned]" thing that "[quenches] all the mirth of those around her" (149). These reactions to Alice highlight large-scale anxiety about how women

[44] One avenue of inquiry this project has not yet considered is how Alice, who embodies wild Nature, remains under the destructive power of man and symbolically images human dominion over the natural environment as devastating.

might negatively impact the domestic realm by leaving it, even as she figuratively abandons domesticity by failing to meet expectations.

Meanwhile, Maule's utter control of Alice caricatures how male domination ruins the real possibility of domestic happiness. The narrative notes that Alice herself "would have deemed it a sin to marry" (149), that is, if she were purportedly in her right mind. Man's power proves dangerous to women's prospects, and so Alice "felt herself too much abased, and longed to change natures with some worm!" (149). Hawthorne expresses this ruin most explicitly as a point of irony when Maule forces Alice to serve as his bride's domestic servant. "Poor Alice was beckoned forth by her unseen despot," Holgrave reads, "and constrained, in her gossamer white dress and satin slippers, to hasten along the street to the mean dwelling of a laboring-man," where Maule forced "proud Alice Pyncheon to wait upon his bride," the laboring-man's daughter (149). The novel periodically uses white to signify purity. For example, early in the novel Phoebe gathers Alice's white roses and brings them indoors, thereby "[purifying]" her bedchamber (54). While Queen Victoria initiated the white wedding dress trend, *Godey's Lady's Book* erroneously popularized the idea that the "custom, *from time immemorial*, has decided on white as its proper hue, emblematic of the *freshness and purity of girlhood*" ("Etiquette of Trousseau" 440, emphasis added). As Alice is *not* the bride, forcing her into a white dress, which the weather soils, highlights her marital unfitness. Furthermore, the weather sullying her clothes, which symbolizes rape, accentuates the violence and violation of male power, or rather of the male "improver."

Nature takes vengence against Maule and grants Alice's self-destructive desires by killing her. Holgrave's representation of these events showcases his character's ongoing transformation:

> the southeast wind drove the mingled snow and rain into her thinly sheltered bosom; her satin slippers were wet through and through, as she trod the muddy sidewalks. The next day a cold; soon, a settled cough; anon, a hectic cheek, a wasted form, that sat beside the harpsichord, and filled the house with music! Music in which a strain of the heavenly choristers was echoed! Oh; joy! For Alice had borne her last humiliation! Oh, greater joy! For Alice was penitent of her one earthly sin, and proud no more! (149-150)

This passage plays on commonplace fears of sickness and death inclement weather would supposedly induce. However, Holgrave inverts this fear of Nature when he expresses "joy" at Alice's fate. This happiness marks how he has sympathized with Alice's suffering, which Nature has finally relieved. His sympathy parallels the narrator's sympathy concerning Nature's failed adoption of the Pyncheon house in the novel's exposition. His second exclamation sarcastically mocks Maule, who "had meant to humble Alice, not to kill her" (150).

Indeed, the subsequent moments support my argument, as Nature (through Alice's death) punishes the man who dominated her. "Last in the [funeral] procession, came Matthew Maule," Holgrave reads, "gnashing his teeth, as if he would have bitten his own heart in twain,—the darkest and wofullest man that ever walked behind a corpse! (150). Maule's ignorance of the possible consequences of his power over Alice mirrors the ignorance of Americans who were threatened by women forgoing domestic expectations. And Holgrave's tale demonstrates how *everyone* suffers because of this ignorance, not

just women. That is, Hawthorne suggest that disparate improvement discourses (whether exemplified through domesticity or expansionism[45]) necessarily degrade American society. Holgrave provides this commentary by deploying the commonplace image of female Nature as violent and terrifying; but he strikingly renders this image as just, and so he vindicates Nature's improvements. Although he offers a seemingly "progressive" viewpoint, this perspective takes time to develop. Initially, his and Phoebe's relationship seems fairly standard for the day.

Phoebe and Holgrave

Phoebe is akin to nature. She cares for Alice's white roses, and the narrator describes her as a ray of sunshine and a garden-rose. She resembles everything Alice was before Matthew Maule's takeover, a cultivated flower. Her contrast with the ugliness of Nature accentuates this point:

> The young girl, so fresh, so unconventional, and yet so orderly and obedient to common rules, as you at once recognize her to be, was widely in contrast, at that moment, with everything about her. The sordid and ugly luxuriance of gigantic weeds, that grew in the angle of the house, and the heavy projection that overshadowed her, and the time-worn frame-work of the door;—none of these things belonged to her sphere. But—even as a ray of sunshine, fall into what dismal place it may, instantaneously creates for itself a propriety in being there—so did it seem altogether fit that the girl should be standing at the threshold. It was no less evidently proper, that the door should swing open to admit her. (51)

Nature symbolically opposes "obedience to common rules," so much so that its repulsive abundance nearly envelopes Phoebe. Importantly, "none of these" manifestations of

[45] Both domesticity and Westward expansion were widely discussed topics in the mid-nineteenth century.

Nature "belonged to her sphere." But the domestic structure welcomes her readily. The discussion that follows illuminates how the narrative explores the power dynamic shaping Holgrave and Phoebe's relationship, as well as Nature's changed relationship with its principal object of improvement—the Pyncheon House—to illustrate Americans' discordant feelings concerning these power dynamic shifts, ultimately favoring partnership.

As I previously detailed, Holgrave began his relationship with Phoebe by rehearsing the conventional sexual division of labor in the garden. However, when he has the opportunity, unlike his ancestor Matthew Maule he eventually refuses to take full possession of Phoebe. After he completes his reading of Alice's narrative, he notices how his voice had lulled Phoebe into the beginnings of a trance state. In this moment, Holgrave assumes he has the same power as his forebear. He noted Phoebe's "remarkable drowsiness … with the lids drooping over her eyes," and believes "a veil was beginning to be muffled about her, in which she could behold only him, and live only in his thoughts and emotions" (150). And like Maule, he observes:

> It was evident, that, with but one wave of his hand and a corresponding effort of his will, he could complete his mastery over Phoebe's yet *free and virgin spirit*; he could establish an influence over this *good, pure, and simple child*, as dangerous, and perhaps as disastrous, as that which the carpenter of his legend had acquired and exercised over the ill-fated Alice. (150)

The language of conquest here very closely resembles his ancestor's, but with added infantilization to emphasize his purported power over Phoebe. He also seems aware that his conquest would mark his violation of her agency and body. However, quite unlike his

forebear, he refused to “[render] his spell over Phoebe indissoluble” (151). His refusal seemingly suggests that he is initiating the beginnings of an egalitarian relationship.

Although, the only perspective the narrative offers is that of the male narrator, or perhaps of Holgrave through free indirect discourse. As such, this limited, masculine perspective becomes immediately suspect. Reading this scene based entirely on Phoebe’s physical and verbal responses, *without* the narrator’s commentary illustrates how men’s delusions support their claims to power. Indeed, this reading would intimate that that is exactly what happened when Holgrave refuses to possess Phoebe. To spare Phoebe embarrassment, Holgrave exclaims, "You really mortify me, my dear Miss Phoebe!" he exclaimed, smiling half-sarcastically at her. “My poor story, it is but too evident, will never do for Godey or Graham!” (151). Holgrave’s half-sarcastic smile suggests his disingenuity. But Phoebe also attempts to save face:

> "Me asleep! How can you say so?" answered Phoebe, as unconscious of the crisis through which she had passed as an infant of the precipice to the verge of which it has rolled. "No, no! I consider myself as having been very attentive; and, though I don't remember the incidents quite distinctly, yet I have an impression of a vast deal of trouble and calamity,—so, no doubt, the story will prove exceedingly attractive." (151)

She protests too much as the narrator continues to infantilize her, characterizing her as innocently unaware, and utterly subject to Holgrave’s (man’s) will. But while she claims to have been very attentive, she manifests symptoms of outright boredom; she cannot even recall most of Holgrave’s reading. While the narrator supports the idea that Holgrave did begin to entrance Phoebe, it seems just as likely that he underestimates *her* power and remains ignorant of *his* weakness.

On the other hand, if we allow that Holgrave's mesmeric power is authentic, then his refusal means that he desires, like Nature, to improve domestic relationships, this time by electing an egalitarian model. Even as it seems he is beginning to reject his former views, which he insinuated through his sexual division of garden labor, he soon rejects his gardening improvements altogether.[46] Holgrave is applying Nature's lesson, a lesson he both wrote about and just finished reading to Phoebe, that the conventional gender hierarchy—and by way of parallel, the nature-culture hierarchy—is dangerous. In a letter to his betrothed Sophia Peabody, dated October 18, 1841, Hawthorne recognizes this danger when it is externalized from the home. Mesmerism was all the rage at the time, and Hawthorne writes Sophia after learning that she frequently received mesmeric treatments to relieve her headaches.

> I am unwilling that a power should be exercised on thee … If I possessed such a power over thee, I should not dare to exercise it; nor can I consent to its being exercised by another. Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies … ("Love" 307)

In this letter, Hawthorne implies that he would make the same choice as Holgrave. He expresses anxiety about a man controlling Sophia, but he uses reason and pathos, as well as his influence as a love interest, to ostensibly control her himself. Hawthorne uses his literary and relational power to influence his intended not to yield to another man's power. But even as he resembles Holgrave's action in this respect, his language seemingly conflicts with my reading of the novel. While Hawthorne fears another man

[46] By the novel's conclusion, he and Phoebe abandon the garden altogether when they move to the country.

"improving" and so "[violating]" Sophia, he insists on "improving" her himself by limiting her access to spiritualist health interventions. His letter both competes with and enacts improvement ideology.

Similarly, *Seven Gables* expresses conflicting language at times about improvement. For example, by the novel's ending, Phoebe has seemingly tempered Holgrave's impractical, wandering spirit. She even remarks to him, "How wonderfully your ideas are changed! A house of stone, Indeed! It is but two or three weeks ago, that you seemed to wish people to live in something as fragile and temporary as a bird's nest!" (222). Their relationship seems overwhelmingly conventional at this point. We could read Phoebe as reinforcing the ideals of the cult of domesticity, namely that the properly domestic wife relieves her husband from the rampant corruption located with the public (male) domain. However, I argue that something else suggestively subversive is at work.

As other scholars have noted, Hawthorne models *Seven Gables* after the domestic novel. For example, Jane Tompkins argues that "the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view … in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (124). Tompkins, of course, subsequently makes her famous case for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as *the* most influential nineteenth century novel. I agree with her assessment of the domestic novel, and of Hawthorne and Melville, but I also argue that Hawthorne

mirrors the domestic novel's critical capacity when he projects his perspectives onto his female characters, similar to the way Brown projects his voice onto Clara Wieland.

For instance, while Alice's character arc explicitly criticizes domesticity's negative impact on female agency, Phoebe's subtly demonstrates her *power* when she influences Holgrave's transformation. Although he admits to Phoebe, "You find me a conservative already," he does so "with a half-melancholy laugh" (222). The narrator records this observation in passing, but Holgrave's admission nevertheless intimates that he has finally *submitted* to Phoebe's domestic influence. Critics often read this ending as unsatisfying cheerful (though Sophia Hawthorne adored it), but we could interpret it as tragic. While Phoebe overpowers Holgrave, bringing him under her domestic influence, her character seemingly reinforces the benefits of the separate spheres. Yet she *is* exercising agency here. This contradiction could imply Hawthorne's cynicism about the plausibility of women's grand-scale success outside the home, while simultaneously lamenting that very failure (again, I refer to Holgrave's "half-melancholy laugh" above).

Furthermore, Hawthorne's portrait of Phoebe and Holgrave's relationship complicates the novel's commentary about America's fraught relationship with nature, because their partnership mirrors the relationship between Nature and the Pyncheon House. The novel does not make a one-sided claim supporting nature and opposing culture. Rather, it questions the sturdiness of that binary. Although the opening scene depicts Nature failing as a mother, after the climax, during which there were "five unkindly days" of torrential storms, "Nature made sweet amends" and finally achieved the familial bond. Now the house's "lines and tufts of green moss, here and there, seemed

pledges of familiarity and sisterhood with Nature" (201). This partnership between Nature and culture seems a manifestation of the renegotiated partnership of Holgrave and Phoebe (and Maule and Pyncheon).

Indeed, Hawthorne emphasizes this partnership repeatedly by the end. Holgrave renegotiates his relationship with Nature when, upon Uncle Venner's recommendation, he considers using Alice's posies—"weeds, you would have called them, only a week ago" (201)—as tokens of his romantic affection toward Phoebe. Aristocratic flowers, plebian vegetables, and weeds were all growing together in abundance. "The growth of the garden," the narrator observes, "seemed to have got quite out of bounds; the weeds had taken advantage of Phoebe's absence, and the long-continued rain, to run rampant over the flowers and kitchen-vegetables (211). Nature overcomes the former strictures Holgrave had instilled, seemingly symbolizing vegetal egalitarianism. Nature also cleanses "man," as Maule's well (the symbol of man's sin and his disastrous improvements) "[overflows] its stone-border, and [makes] a pool of formidable breath, in that corner of the garden" (211). And lastly, Phoebe and Holgrave, along with Hepzibah and Clifford, settle in a domestic structure in the country. The novel's concluding imagery cleanses (figuratively, through rainstorms) the three major symbol of man's improvements—the Pyncheon house, the garden, and Maule's well—and, alongside Phoebe and Holgrave's union, celebrates Nature's fusion with culture.

CHAPTER VI

CODA: THE MONSTER OF WALDEN POND

Walden is undoubtedly ecocriticism's urtext, and Henry David Thoreau is perhaps the last author that one might expect to see in a project on Gothic environmentalism. Yet reconsidering him now puts the proverbial nail in the coffin regarding how we define and employ what is now called the *ecogothic*. While scholars have debated the merits of defining the term as a lens or a mode, this project has clarified the limitations of the latter—specifically, that it ignores Gothicism's longtime interest in natural environments and it restricts the kinds of texts and interpretive valences that an ecogothic *lens* affords. No one has read *Walden* as a Gothic text, and rightly so. However, interpreting wildness, which Thoreau represents as uncontrolled freedom, from an ecogothic lens transforms what Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils call the "innocuous natural world found in the writings of the Transcendentalists" (48) into something of a nightmare. It renders Thoreau as someone not unlike Shelley's monster and so magnifies the Walden landscape as a space of conflict rather than harmony.[47]

Woodchucks posed constant problems for Thoreau as they regularly ransacked his beanfield. As readers might have expected, Thoreau responded by trying to determine how to rid himself of this nuisance without violence. Laura Dassow Walls observes that

[47] See Laura Dassow Walls's biography of Thoreau for commentary on how his Walden project further suggests this conflict (203).

when Thoreau "asked a local farmer how to trap them without injury," the farmer responded, "'Yes, shoot 'em, you damn fool'" (203). Thoreau's incessant pursuit of harmony with the nonhuman world contributes heavily to the legends that characterize him as "a modern Orpheus … or an American St. Francis of Assisi," which circulated during his lifetime (Walls 203).

However, the opening of his chapter "Higher Laws" paints a self-image at once ruthless and bloodthirsty. Thoreau's wildness surfaces not as a utopian ideal that promotes harmony with nature, but as something joyfully combatting the nonhuman for survival:

> As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. (202)

Thoreau is of course beginning the chapter's contrast between humans' primal instinct and his own "higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life" (202). But his description of the primal instinct seems heavily Gothicized. Isolated by woods during the night and imaginatively combatting the wild animal, he evokes quintessentially American Gothic features reminiscent of Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*. Huntly, a sleepwalker, awakens in the night and finds himself in a cave when a panther attacks him. After he overpowers and kills it, he drinks its blood and consumes its flesh.

Thoreau presents his scene as even more disturbing than Brown's because he regularly refers to nonhuman species as his "neighbors," like mice and birds in the

chapter “Brute Neighbors,” and in so doing humanizes them. That context renders the author’s primal urge to hunt as the desire to” cannibalize” the woodchuck. And Thoreau’s language appears especially brutal when he only mentions seizing and consuming his victim raw, forgoing any suggestion of killing it first. This kind of wildness, Thoreau seems to imply, is often combative, transforming him on occasions into “half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment” (202). But as he marks this feeling as “strange,” he subtly implies that his battle with woodchucks implicates human attitudes and behavior as the source of this discord. Indeed, “I found myself,” he remarks, “and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverenced them *both*” (202, emphasis added).

Thoreau’s opening passage seems to associate utter wildness with the horrid violence witnessed in so many Gothic narratives, yet it also implies that the inverse, excess spirituality, estranges us from nature. Thoreau’s Gothicized wildness enables him to accentuate the danger of these extremes and promote balance. “These beans,” he recognizes, “have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly?” (161). As Walls puts it, “There was no word in Thoreau’s lifetime for what we now call ecology, but his growing awareness was turning his thought—far in advance of his time—to ecological relationships in which humans participated but could not declare dominance” (205). Read in this light, Thoreau’s opening image suggests the monstrosity of the human’s desire to dominate his environments and the other species that also live there. The ecogothic lens casts different light on this familiar text,

demonstrating how one of America's preeminent nature writers deployed Gothicism to make his environmental argument.

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